Vital Questions

& Trends in Education

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& SOARING

Introduction

For a quarter of a century now, I've been immersed in education – from graduate studies to teaching and administrating in various school types: public and international schools, independent traditional schools, independent progressive schools, and now, for the last eight years, Marin Montessori.

Today as we celebrate the start of 2023, I invite you to consider with me this: How have the unique disruptions, challenges, and opportunities we've collectively lived through impacted education as we know it?

Like many aspects of our society, education is in a time of transformation. On my mind specifically are six urgent questions about the future of schools in our society. Though the answers to each aren't always obvious, understanding the context and specifics of the questions is an important first step for us all:

- What is the purpose of education, and what really makes a school "great"?
- What is a school's role in developing citizenship and correcting historical wrongs?
- What is the ideal role of digital technologies in education?
- How can schools best support their students' mental health?
- How can schools best support girls, boys, and LGBTQ students?
- How will schools adapt and thrive: Public, Independent, Non-Profit, and For-Profit?

– Sam Shapiro | Head of Marin Montessori School

What Is the Purpose of Education and What Really Makes a School "Great"?

Mark Twain once quipped that "I have never let my schooling interfere with my education." This may have been prescient: today there is increasing consensus that the usual approach to schooling misses the mark dramatically.

School is still essential, with the pandemic roundly proving the profound value of in-person learning. In terms of economic stability and work satisfaction, the value of a college degree is still pronounced.

However, two foundational aspects and assumptions of conventional schools are clearly antiquated: First, they tend to be built on the theory that children and teens must be externally motivated to learn. As a result, they prompt students' engagement through external rewards (e.g., praise, stickers, candies, "student of the month" awards, grades, etc.) and punishments (e.g., shame, withholding prizes and praise, grades, etc.).

In fact, we know children are born already deeply curious and eager to learn and develop their independence. Sometimes external motivators are needed for all of us to change habits or lean into areas of learning we avoid. Sadly though, if we operate with the dominant assumption that students won't want to learn unless externally motivated, we create a self-fulfilling prophecy: Children begin school passionate and internally driven to learn, but the structures and systems we make end up being the cause of a child or teen's diminished curiosity and increased boredom and disengagement.

Second, conventional schools tend to limit assessment of students' learning to their ability to memorize short-term chunks of information and then repeat what they've memorized back onto narrow, discrete written tests. In the real

world of our lives, knowing if we've truly learned something requires complex demonstrations in which we apply this knowledge to new, challenging and multi-faceted tasks.

What happens when we create schools that operate under the general assumption that kids and teens will not engage with curiosity and depth and instead need external motivators to learn? What happens when we believe it's enough to assess students' knowledge through uniform, limited, written tests?

Unfortunately, we create the conditions for the inevitable: We end up diminishing our children's curiosity and rewarding passivity, short-term memorization, and praise obsession over our urgent need for activated, self-driven, deep learners. (Stanford Professor of Education Denise Pope's book "Doing School," and former Yale and Columbia Professor Bill Deresiewicz's "Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite" offer further insightful critiques.)

Disruption is the nature of our times, and the speed at which industries and the world are changing is breathtaking. (This is likely why the Department of Labor predicts that 65 percent of the careers our kids will have, have yet to be invented). More and more, educational leaders recognize the purpose of school now is this: to develop highly curious and highly capable problem solvers who can think independently and "outside the box." Great schools do this. Passive learning and hoop-jumping will not develop the qualities we need in the next generation of adults who will tackle the complexities of this world.

Here are a few examples of developments toward more authentic, activated learning that I find particularly exciting:

- The Mastery Transcript Consortium gathers a diverse collection of high schools whose goal is to replace letter-grade-based transcripts with "mastery transcripts" that identify and evaluate students' development of

mastery--not short-term memorization. Schools on board include traditional boarding schools like Phillips Andover Academy and many local independent high schools, including Marin Academy, The Branson School, San Francisco University High School, and the Urban School of San Francisco. This brief animated video summary of Daniel Pink′s book ″Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us″ offers insights into the essential role of ″mastery″ in motivating students. (Fun fact: MMS′ own Terry Dubow, Director of Communications & Story, was on the founding team of the Mastery Transcript Consortium and helped start the brick-and-mortar Mastery School.)

- A growing movement in education seeks to move beyond narrow, short-term-memorization-rewarding testing to "Authentic Assessment."

- Defined as ″a teaching method in which students learn by actively engaging in real-world and personally meaningful projects,″ Project-Based Learning is growing in popularity as a pedagogy in several schools. It is not new, however, with its roots found in authentic Montessori education and the educational theories of scholars like John Dewey and Kurt Hahn. The widely celebrated High Tech High in San Diego has been at the vanguard of the PBL movement and now even offers teaching credentials in the methodology. (Sonoma County Department of Education has been very engaged in bringing Project Based Learning approaches to its public schools.)

- USC′s newest and most popular school, Iovine & Young Academy, offers a single major that incorporates design, business, technology, and communications. The program seeks to graduate young people ″...who can integrate divergent ideas to develop new ways of working, learning, collaborating in key emerging specializations of the 21st century – design strategy, digital transformation, business innovation, experiential computing, sustainable development, health innovation, and

participatory wellness, inclusive learning, and entrepreneurship." The Academy's "Capstone Experience," in which students demonstrate mastery through in-depth projects, reminds me of the Personal Odyssey Projects our MMS Junior High students undertake multiple times each school year.

● Colleges have made it clear: They are fatigued by the tired resume-building formula well known to applicants: volunteer here, play this instrument, have this international experience, win this student government election, write about changing the world…. rinse, wash, repeat… Instead of breadth, colleges seek depth: applicants with a drive toward mastery; applicants who have developed and dug deeply into a demonstrated passion. This passion could be anything…the key is the pursuit of depth, meaning, and mastery. (It may strike you as ironic, but Harvard even has this for applicants: "Tips for Finding Your Passion.")

What Are Schools' Roles in Developing Citizens and Correcting Historical Wrongs?

With the U.S. polarizing politically faster than any other nation, how do we support our democracy's health? In education, there is a clash between efforts to foster greater diversity, justice, and inclusivity (both in the curriculum and in students' experiences) and fears of censorship, reverse discrimination, loss of intellectual freedoms, and political pressure.

In the summer of 2020, following the murder of George Floyd at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer, these tensions grew pronounced. The crime sparked outrage and a growing awareness of the historical legacy of slavery and systematized racist practices. Additionally, increasing public awareness of the risks experienced by transgender Americans (e.g., transgender citizens are four times more likely to be victims of violent crimes) prompted schools to respond with sincere attempts to meet the moment and become part of the solution to creating a more fair, just, anti-racist, and inclusive society.

Many students, their families, and local and national politicians from every region, though, clashed with the rollout of these efforts. (A podcast episode from "The Daily" takes a deep dive into the experiences of one small, rural Michigan school district fighting over the topic of race and racism in 2020.)

Legislation and pressure on school boards, the likes of which I've never seen in my lifetime, raise these questions: What is a school's role in helping shape students' views about the U.S. and how to be effective citizens? What is the role of a school in assisting students in understanding race, racism, and gender, including their own? And, through which and whose lenses may a school teach?

Here are additional resources to explore and contextualize the topic further:

- This article, "How L.A.'s Brentwood School Became a Battleground in the Culture Wars," offers a window into the phenomenon. And the right-leaning "Project Veritas'" controversial work is representative as well: They set up a hidden video operation to capture the views of an administrator from a prestigious independent school in Manhattan and then published a heavily edited video of her comments; their goal is to publicize evidence in support of their accusation that schools are left-leaning, attempting to indoctrinate students, and must be fought. (The filming and editing of the video are ethically problematic, and, taken as they are, the speaker's comments are distressing.)

    - More than Critical Race Theory or Social Emotional Learning, teaching about LGBTQ rights and gender identity is currently the most divisive issue in schools in the U.S.

- The Bay Area organization The Mosaic Project offers an innovative approach to increasing understanding and decreasing bias and polarization. They bring school-aged children of highly diverse backgrounds together for a week of camp and learning together. This video offers an inspiring overview.

- The University of Chicago included in its acceptance letter to freshmen applicants the note that, "Our commitment to academic freedom means that we do not support so-called 'trigger warnings,' we do not cancel invited speakers because their topics might prove controversial, and we do not condone the creation of intellectual 'safe spaces' where individuals can retreat from ideas and perspectives at odds with their own..."
    - Conversely, the research has made clear the value of creating schools in which students feel safe and connected: when students

feel unsafe and/or excluded, their brains do not learn as well. (Put simply, we are either in the "Learning Brain or the Survival Brain," and when in survival--because we don't feel psychologically safe--we learn less.) The desire to create schools whose curriculum reflects diverse perspectives and takes an explicit stand against racism, homophobia, and sexism could create better learning conditions for students who traditionally have been and felt outside the dominant culture.

- While most college students report that they sometimes censor their speech out of fear of classmates' and professors' judgments, it's a complicated topic. (i.e. the vast majority also report feeling their colleges encourage free thinking and speech and intellectual freedom. B. Don't we all sometimes censor ourselves, even amongst family and friends? C. Black and Hispanic college students report feeling unsafe expressing their views at higher rates than white students.)

- To dig more deeply into the debate connected to the development of intellectual freedom and critical thinking being at odds with efforts toward psychological safety and inclusion, I highly recommend the following: This recent article in the Chronicle of Higher Education, "Do Students Self-Censor? Here's What the Data Tells Us," and the book "The Coddling of the American Mind" (Haidt & Lukianoff).

- If you've not seen it yet, check out Story Corp's "One Small Step" initiative. It is an "...effort to remind the country of the humanity in all of us, even those with whom we disagree. The initiative brings strangers with different political views together to record a 50-minute conversation—not to debate politics, but to learn who we are as people. Audio recordings of each interview are archived at the Library of Congress." Here are recordings of conversations. Here's a wonderful two-minute preview.

- This year, more than 80 percent of U.S. colleges and universities stopped requiring applicants to submit SAT or ACT scores. For the last two years, all Bay Area independent high schools have not required applicants to submit SSAT scores. This move away from standardization is rooted in a desire to offer a more even playing field--knowing students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds can afford private tutoring and private classes to prepare for these tests. Of course, the question remains: how will high schools and colleges fairly evaluate applicants, given the wide variety of ways different schools report student performance, let alone the fact of grade inflation?

- For three summers, I taught students from around the Bay Area through UC Berkeley's six-week summer Pre-College Academy, which is part of their Early Academic Outreach Program. The intensive wrap-around services approach to supporting first-generation college aspiring students from under-resourced public high schools is an example of a strategy that works: it helps actualize into reality the "American Dream" for young people (e.g., the college admissions and graduation rates of EAOP students are excellent).

- Book banning rates increased in 2022 over 2021, and these bans disproportionately affected books written by LGBTQ authors and authors of color. (Based on a survey by Morning Consult from October 2022, 24 percent of self-identified liberals and 43 percent of self-identified conservatives "say parents need more influence over books kids read in school."

- Just yesterday, the New York Times published this article: "Strife in the Schools: Education Dept. Logs Record Number of Discrimination Complaints. Some of the highest-profile complaints show how America's culture wars are affecting the nation's children."

- The NBC News Podcast, "Southlake" is also a valuable listen. It "...tells the story of how this idyllic city, and its local school board election, became the poster child for a new political strategy with national repercussions."

- Given the growing backlash and outrage culture of our times, teachers are increasingly afraid to teach, especially history.

- The local Bay Area organization, "Gender Spectrum" offers valuable resources and consultations to schools and communities. Their mission is to help create "gender-sensitive and inclusive environments for all children and teens."

What Is the Ideal Role of Digital Technologies in Education?

The power of digital technology is awesome. Literally. What the phones in our pockets and the laptops on our desks can do and give us access to--and all so quickly--is breathtaking.

But so are the perils and potentials of these technologies for our kids.

This year we brought Dr. Sharon Maxwell out from Boston to work with our Upper Elementary and Junior High parents and students around wellness and digital technology, asking What does a healthy relationship with digital devices and online platforms look like? There still remain more questions than answers. Indeed, with regards to figuring out how to best, and most healthfully, relate to digital technologies for learning, we are building the plane while we are flying it.

While the pandemic showcased the limits of full-time online learning (as did San Jose State's [failed experiment](#) in 2013), there are still many benefits available. More and more schools, including popular undergraduate physics classes at Harvard University, utilize the "[flipped classroom](#)" model: Didactic information in lecture format is delivered via video recordings to watch at home.

The time students then have in person in the classroom is privileged for Socratic discussion, Q&A, laboratory work, and experiential learning. Students can learn factual information through online platforms. However, we know students still learn better in person with the relational dynamics creating [more stimulating, engaging, memorable experiences.](#) So, in high school and college, using the flipped model to prioritize time in person for the most complex, relational, and hands-on work is an exciting approach.

Another exciting development is the availability of free online courses for supplemental and lifelong learning:

- Students across the world benefit every day through access to [Khan Academy's](#) free math tutorials.
- Stanford University now offers hundreds of courses [for free to the public](#) (here's one on [Child Nutrition & Cooking!](#))
- [Harvard University](#) offers these as well (here's one on [Improving Your Business Through a Culture of Health](#)). (Personally, I loved "[Justice: An Introduction to Moral and Political Philosophy](#)" offered by Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. You can enroll for free or pay a fee to receive a certificate.)

One topic that is not a question is digital devices and young children: With concerns for brain and concentration development, the American Academy of Pediatrics encourages parents to eliminate or strictly limit their children's screen time. For older students, the research on the value of giving them laptops or tablets to bring to school shows [very mixed consequences](#): For students who can self-regulate and stay focused on their classes and studies (resisting the siren call of the internet and social media), there are learning benefits with laptops and tablets. Unfortunately, most students don't know how to, or choose not to, resist.

In a recent study, college students with laptops in their classes spent close to half of the class time--40 of the 100 minutes---looking at social media or other non-class-related websites. (Don't worry: I won't ask you if you've ever quietly clicked out of a Zoom work meeting to check other sites...)

The question remains: How can we harness the benefits of these ultra-powerful technologies for students while preventing the deleterious consequences to their capacities for deep learning and neurological health?

Ultimately, it appears that for adolescents and beyond, digital devices can be valuable for accessing factual information, and even learning concrete skills (e.g., I loved witnessing my sons learn the art of origami and how to play the ukulele through online tutorials), but the damage to their concentration can outweigh their potential benefits. While "flipping" learning to use in-person classroom time for the most complex work could have continued advantages, it will be essential to couple these approaches with training in mindfulness for focus and to promote the use of online tools that prevent distraction while in class and while studying.

Finally, utilizing the younger years for the development of logic and language will prepare students to learn computer coding later on if that's of interest--as coding is rooted in logic and language; passively using devices, websites, and apps is really of no help in this development and only increase distractibility

How Can Schools Best Support Their Students' Mental Health?

While we most certainly have a critical role to play, schools can't alone be held responsible for the mental health of our society's children and adolescents. We must examine and adjust the larger culture, social fabric, and media ecosystem in which our youth are raised and influenced. We must examine and adjust home environments and parenting approaches to best serve our youths' well-being. We need to normalize conversations about mental health and de-stigmatize mental health treatments. The [mental health crisis amongst our country's children and teens is real. It is well-known and well-documented](#).

All of us, including those of us in schools, need to be engaged.

What follows are resources I have found especially helpful in contextualizing this crisis and understanding concrete strategies for fighting it:

- I highly recommend checking out the resources offered by the [Greater Good Science Center](#) at UC Berkeley--specifically their resources for parents and families.

- This episode of "The Daily" podcast, "[Inside the Adolescent Mental Health Crisis](#)" is most informative. Especially memorable is the point that not long ago, the main risks teens faced were external--e.g., drunk driving, pregnancy, drug abuse--yet for today's youth, the main dangers are internal--i.e., depression and anxiety. Of increased concern is the fact that children growing up in [affluent communities](#) like Marin are now more likely than any other economic group to suffer from anxiety, depression, and substance abuse.

- To better understand the risk factors of raising children amongst affluence, as well as how to ameliorate these risks, I highly recommend the following books:
    - From local psychologist and best-selling author Madeline Levine, "The Price of Privilege." (Fun Fact: In her most recent book, "Ready or Not: Preparing Our Kids to Thrive in an Uncertain and Rapidly Changing World," Levine names Marin Montessori's Junior High program specifically as the exemplar of how to get adolescent education right!)
    - Julie Lythcott-Haims' (Stanford University's former freshman dean and academic advisor), "How to Raise an Adult: Break Free of the Overparenting Trap and Prepare Your Kid for Success,"
    - Jessica Lahey's (middle and high school teacher and New York Times writer), "The Gift of Failure: How the Best Parents Learn to Let Go So Their Children Can Succeed."
    - University of Pennsylvania Professor of Psychology Angela Duckworth's, "Grit: The Power and Passion of Perseverance."
    - Psychologist and parenting expert Michele Borba's "Thrivers: The Surprising Reasons Why Some Kids Struggle and Others Shine."

- A genuinely child and adolescent-centered, caring and kind community, Marin Montessori has always integrated--it's really woven into all we do--the development of empathy, growth mindset, emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, self-awareness, and self-compassion. Additionally, we have a consulting psychologist who works with our Junior High community, and we take a very direct, honest approach to teaching media literacy (i.e. relationship with digital technologies) and health and human development; this year we brought Dr. Sharon Maxwell and Chelsea Maxwell in from Boston to work with Upper Elementary and Junior High students and their families on these topics. That said, we do not educate in a vacuum, and the larger pressures and influences our students' experiences beyond MMS touch us as well; the

negative impacts of the pandemic, especially on current older elementary and junior high and high school-aged students' behaviors and well being are noteworthy.

○ Given that one of the causes of the greater rates of anxiety, depression, and substance abuse amongst youth in affluent communities is connected to pressure to appear and perform in very specific ways, it's essential that MMS remain a "big tent," nurturing and challenging the unique potentials of each child, without promoting a narrow definition of what makes a child or teen "affirmable."

● It is good to see that many schools are now seeking and investing in approaches to support students' well-being through greater access to counseling services and curriculum that has generally been termed SEL, for "Social Emotional Learning." (Unfortunately, even this has become entangled in the culture wars, with some accusing SEL of being a trojan horse for progressive ideologies. Florida recently banned SEL from its textbooks.)

● For sixteen years, Challenge Success, based out of Stanford University's Graduate School of Education, has been at the forefront of helping schools with high anxiety cultures increase student well-being. Grounded in research-backed strategies, their influence continues to grow--and be needed.

● An incredibly inspiring example of one approach to helping less-resourced Bay Area students' well-being was profiled on the PBS Newshour. It's a partnership between Stanford University and the Cesar Chavez Academy in East Palo Alto. Here's the segment.

- [This piece from Mayo Clinic](#) offers a highly readable overview of the research on the impact of social media on youth, as well as specific parenting strategy suggestions.

- Another exciting Bay Area development is the founding of the [Millennium School](#), a newer San Francisco independent middle school highly focused on developing skills for social-emotional well-being. Millenium recently invited the larger MMS community to their ["Being Well, Parenting Well"](#) speaker series. (Fun fact: Millennium's founder is the amazing Jeff Snipes, dad to three MMS alumni, and Jeff is a former MMS trustee and Board Chair.)

How to Best Support Girls, Boys, and LGBTQ Students?

Girls

Advances by girls and women are a cause for celebration. However, stubborn barriers and antiquated sexist practices and assumptions remain (e.g., a 2020 UN Report found that around the world, 90 percent of people--both women and men--still have deeply ingrained biases against women) and require our continued and renewed commitment to promoting gender equity.

In education, girls and women have made considerable strides in academic accomplishments with girls and women achieving more success than boys and men in schools and colleges. However, in STEM (i.e., Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) programs and fields, girls and women are still underrepresented.

Experts theorize that math anxiety is a crucial reason fewer girls and women enter STEM fields. Hence, as parents and educators, it's important that we carefully consider how we offer students a math education that inspires excitement and a brave growth mindset.

I'm most excited by Stanford Professor of Math Education Jo Boaler's work and her book," Mathematical Mindsets: Unleashing Students' Potential Through Creative Math, Inspiring Messages and Innovative Teaching." Professor Boaler's life mission is to promote math education that inspires a growth mindset and complex critical and creative thinking and reduces math anxiety. (One of her findings that is the simplest to respond to is the deleterious impact of emphasizing speed on math work--finding no correlation between quickness of completing math work with sophisticated mathematical thinking; speed emphasis through high-pressure timed assessments is posited to be a significant cause of math anxiety and students' development of "I'm not

good at math" inner narratives..) Her TEDx [talk](#) is worth a view, as is her [website](#) for students, parents, and teachers.

Though there are differences in causes and expressions, both girls and boys in our society are at increased (and sadly increasing) risks for mental health struggles. The impacts of 24/7 [social comparison](#) and commentary through social media and digital communication are of particular risk for girls.

Until there are meaningful changes in these mediums, it is highly beneficial if parents can keep their girls off of social media while also teaching them media literacy--teaching them both the risks associated with its use and the way platforms are designed to create compulsive use and increase consumerism (e.g., paid influencers, product placements, etc.). [The Social Dilemma](#) documentary is an excellent resource to watch with your preadolescent or adolescent of any gender to help them become savvy, critical-thinking technology users.

Finally, for anyone teaching or parenting pre-teen or teenage girls, I highly recommend the book, ["Untangled: Guiding Teenage Girls Through Seven Transitions Into Adulthood"](#) (Damour).

Boys

While men are still over-represented in several higher-income and higher-status fields, boys and young men are struggling overall. They do significantly worse in K-12 and university education and have higher suicide rates and rates of loneliness. For an overview of the issues, I strongly recommend this brief Op-Ed from David Brooks, [The Crisis of Men and Boys.](#)

Based on the way, in general, their brains and bodies develop at different paces, there are good arguments for schools to consider different ages for girls and boys to begin elementary school. For example, the article ["Redshirt the](#)

Boys" presents compelling evidence and arguments for starting boys later in school to allow for their slower neurological and physical development. (In highly educated communities, it's more common for parents to delay starting their sons, but this practice will only benefit society if it extends to all communities.)

Schools and parents also need to find better ways to connect with boys--especially preadolescent and adolescent boys--in ways that honor their voices and experiences while also educating them to understand the legacy and ongoing problems of sexism and gender inequality. Young men today tend to struggle to find models of masculinity that feel empowering and energizing and that are not criticized and dismissed by the larger culture.

Much of the popularity with boys and young men of figures like Jordan Peterson and Joe Rogan is that they present to boys and young men a confident version of masculinity that conveys self-worth to boys; their unapologetic personas and their emphasis on individual personal responsibility appeal to boys who feel shaky about the different messages they pick up on how the world wants them to be.

If our sons or boy students are interested in activities and topics that are skewed toward the traditionally hyper-masculine, let's not shame them for this. Instead, let's pause to listen deeply to the needs they are seeking to fulfill through these interests and activities.

Two books that I've found helpful in teaching adolescent boys and raising sons are "Real Boys Voices" (Pollack & Shuster) and "Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys" (Kidlon, Barker, & Thompson). For my sons specifically, they found great value in becoming more solid and confident in their identities as young men through wilderness experiences: specifically, they participated in summer wilderness adventures and challenges through NOLS (National Outdoor Leadership School), which I can highly recommend.

LGBTQ

Single-Sex schools are at the forefront of our society's thinking about gender (i.e., "sex" as biology and "gender" as socially constructed identity and behaviors): Across the country, many prestigious secondary all-girls schools, such as Los Angeles' Marlborough School and Manhattan's The Nightingale-Bamford School, The Brearley School, and The Spence School, have already taken action and issued revised, explicit policies and guidelines. For example, Marlborough and Nightingale now have policies that will consider "any applicant who identifies as female, including those assigned male at birth."

The risk factors facing LGBTQ youth are still pronounced because of the antipathy and misunderstanding they often face. Therefore, ensuring our children understand and appreciate the diverse ways humans experience and express sexuality and gender is essential to both protect our youth and create a more inclusive society. If you are parenting young children, there are many recommendations like these online for children's books that feature and celebrate same-sex parents; this is a good place to start.

How Will Schools Adapt and Thrive: Public, Independent Non-Profit, For-Profit, Rankings?

[Data show](#) that today fewer families choose to send their children to public schools while more choose independent schools. Each system faces its distinct pressures from outside forces and a changing world.

Public Schools

Though of course individual districts and counties will vary widely, overall public schools are facing a crisis of epic proportions regarding the loss of teachers. Unfortunately, fewer college students enroll in teacher education and credentialing programs, and fewer parents report being supportive if their children express a desire to become a teacher.

This New York Times video, [Empty Classrooms, Abandoned Kids: Inside the Great Teacher Resignation,](#) offers powerful insights into the lived experiences of public school teachers in many districts today.

Public schools will continue to educate the vast majority of our youth (only about nine percent of U.S. students attend private schools), and these youth will be in charge of our futures. The need to increase teachers' compensation and elevate our society's respect for educators could not be more urgent.

Independent & Non-Profit

For non-profit independent schools like Marin Montessori, we face the challenge of economic sustainability; for the last twenty years, the costs of running schools have outpaced income growth. Therefore, seeking new models for cost savings and revenue generation, along with increased tuition assistance, is essential for ensuring both the viability and the accessibility of

independent schools. For all Bay Area schools, offering faculty compensation models that allow teachers to make their lives in the Bay Area continues to be an essential need.

For-Profit

For-profit schools have seen increased support from private equity. (See, "Can Childcare be Big Business? Private Equity Thinks So.") The case study of the now defunct Bay Area Alt-Schools (its founder dubbed the approach "Montessori 2.0" and had huge financial backing from Mark Zukerberg, Peter Theil, and Laurene Powell Jobs, to name just a few) is fascinating. They eventually sold their intellectual property to a company that is now opening hundreds of for-profit "Guidepost Montessori" schools worldwide.

For-profit schools have yet to find long-term success in the U.S. In part, families are understandably skeptical of putting their children's education and well-being into the hands of companies whose primary mission is financial profit. Additionally, given how difficult it is for any school to sustain itself financially, let alone generate profits for owners or shareholders, such business ventures usually falter.

Finally, as the article referenced above points out, for-profit childcare companies seek to protect their profits by using lobbyists to thwart attempts to provide more Americans with free or reduced-cost preschool and childcare services; this compromises the well-being of the whole country and leads to further skepticism about their ultimate value.

The Question of Rankings

The success of all schools, including public schools, is influenced by external rankings. Sites like GreatSchools.org and Niche.com rank and rate K-12 schools. U.S. News & World Report's college rankings are profoundly

influential in making and breaking colleges' reputations, and the public's perception of their overall value and status.

Students and their families will often be drawn to choosing colleges based on the rankings U.S. News & World Report makes, assuming higher-ranked schools will give them a better education and greater advantages in their lives after college. However, recently Yale and Harvard Law Schools both very publically came out against these rankings, stating they'd no longer participate and arguing that the metrics used are highly problematic (you can read all about it [here](#)).

As parents, it's essential that our children and we think critically about the question of what makes any school "great"? By whose values and by what metrics? Certainly, name and reputation can open doors to social networks and opportunities. And, how do we rank the value of this compared to other values we seek through education?

Stanford's Challenge Success recently published a white paper, "[A 'Fit' Over Ranking](#)" on the topic; it's a very worthwhile read. In Malcolm Gladwell's book, David and Goliath, he provides a number of anecdotes and data to show that sometimes being a "big fish in a little pond" is actually more advantageous for students' success.

The chapter titled, "Caroline Sacks: If I'd gone to the University of Maryland I'd Still be in the Sciences" is specifically focused on this phenomenon. You can get a gist of these ideas [here.](#)

Putting It All Together

As we prepare to celebrate MMS' 60th anniversary next year, I could not be prouder and more passionate to lead our school. We continue to flourish and

smartly adapt to give this complex and ever-changing world what it needs: A school and community that effectively educates and nurtures children and adolescents, helping them grow into the knowledgeable, self-aware, independent, energized, and compassionate young people and adults they become.

(How celebratory and not surprising, this recent longitudinal research finding the [long-term benefits](link) to adult well-being enjoyed by those educated through Montessori.)

For a boost of inspiration and a reminder of the value of the quality of the school community of which you are part, I encourage you to [take a look at some of the offerings here.](link)

It's invigorating to be part of a community so willing to ask the vital questions facing schools and so ready to explore all the possible answers.