

We must place trust in schools again

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If June is a restless month in schools, September is buoyant. The start of the school year should impart possibility and momentum – and a dash of nervousness.

But the past two Septembers instead generated disquiet. School life – both social and academic – was throttled and made precarious by the pandemic. From no-talking lunches, to cancelled field trips, to drawn-out absences, to the online kindergarten classes where I watched my daughter and her teacher try their damndest, school existed on a continuum from damaging to good enough. Socially, the distance between some classmates turned them into strangers. Instructionally, teachers trimmed the sails of their ambition by doing less with less.

In our darkest moments, we forgot what schools are really for. Parents began to see them as purely custodial in nature, a place to look after their kids while they worked or tried to stay sane. Health care professionals and politicians watched schools from a distance as vectors for disease transmission. Students missed them as reliable places for social interaction.

The most essential element of the learning environment, it turned out, was not this or that lesson and its cloudy unimportance, but other humans. Following the trend of how some Canadians view the country's institutions, the public lost trust in schools.

The trust factor is important, not least because it weakens the system and percolates to students. Parental anxiety about school often transfers to how kids feel. In Maximum City's analysis of a [survey](#) last year of over 7,500 Ontario parents, 69 per cent were more than

somewhat concerned about the pandemic's affect on their children's education; only 8 per cent responded that they were not at all concerned.

Among education researchers, there is also the known unknown of incomplete data on how Canadian students performed in literacy and numeracy during the pandemic, beyond what can be gleaned from their grades and a sprinkling of standardized test results in some provinces. To be clear, a stricter focus on this data should not be the end goal since it reveals only part of the story of COVID's long shadow on schools.

Next, let's recognize and name the threats: another wave of a relentless pandemic, staff burnout, labour unrest, deficient facilities, physical inactivity at historic levels for some children and youth. Be wary of these threats because any one of them could knock the system off its rails.

Let's be equally clear about something else: If the system during the worst of the pandemic felt like a crumbling historic building, committed teachers were the scaffolding who held it up. They worked through constant disruption with its dystopian and technocratic language – learning loss, pivot, hybrid learning – to find a way to make sense of something that made no sense. Teach students in our classroom but also those at home, using two different lessons at the same time, with spotty tech? Sure.

When making the case that this year will be a better one for schools, the foundation of the argument is teachers – specifically, ones who upskilled and became more professionally resilient, with a deepened sense of empathy, during the pandemic. While parents and system leaders were banned from schools and classrooms, teachers endured and bore witness. Call them the strong parts of a weak system. And as they developed new practices and capacities, the old model of teachers enthroned at their desks, looking down on their students, was demolished for good.

Not every teacher who taught during the pandemic is now a better teacher – some burned out and moved on, some felt useless and stagnated – but the majority are. And this majority contains much of the DNA for rebuilding a better school system that engages more and diverse students. These teachers will also be the bulwark against the aforementioned threats, with parents and principals as their closest allies. What they need now is more autonomy, less bureaucratic interference. Trust them.

Finally, if teachers are the foundation for a better school year and system, students are the bulk of the rest of the structure. There is a movement – part evidence, part desperation – that this generation of young people are uniquely positioned to make a liminal difference in society and be change makers in a world going bad.

To fulfill this lofty promise, schools need to first be trusted again as places of social good. Second, they themselves need to decisively buy into this movement by working to create meaning and purpose for all students, ultimately putting them in charge of the future. September is a hopeful month.

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