

Why Is the Nation Invested in Tearing Down Public Education?

We need a new education story with children and teachers at the center

By Deborah Loewenberg Ball — February 16, 2024

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For the past four years, we have been retelling a shared narrative of education crisis and the severe learning losses our nation's children have suffered as a result of the pandemic. Headlines scream calamity—"Two Decades of Progress, Nearly Gone: National Math, Reading Scores Hit Historic Lows," for instance. We are provided with data about the drop in scores, offered analyses about who has suffered most, and warned that we don't get the severity of the crisis.

Missing from this story is that U.S. students fared *better* than most of the rest of the world during the pandemic. That view doesn't fit the hopeless crisis narrative, a narrative to which Americans seem wedded. Take, for example, the widely cited 1983 National Commission on Excellence in Education report, "A Nation at Risk

, which advanced the dramatic claim that "the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a People." More recently, the federal legislation No Child Left Behind (2001) and Race to the Top (2009) were rooted in panic about the failure of our schools.

Now in 2024, let's confront this habit. And let's be real about it. It is obvious that students did not—could not—learn all we might hope over the past four years. The pandemic caused a rupture in daily life of unimaginable magnitude. More than a million Americans died. Why would we expect that children would have learned as well or as much during this time? Much schooling was remote, forcing teachers and students to learn rapidly how to work together without being together. Where children and teachers did work in person, their interactions were impaired by masks, social distancing, and interruptions due to illness. There is no quick fix that erases this unprecedented break with everyday schooling.

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From this perspective, the narrative about catastrophic declines merits a more critical eye. We hear that National Assessment of Educational Progress reading scores for 8th graders dipped since 2019, that 4th graders' math scores declined. Set in context, though, performance on NAEP has been rising since 2000 in both math and reading. The dips since 2019 are unsurprising. Neither is it that the pandemic alone disproportionately affected the learning of children of color and low-income children; these results mirror long-term patterns of crushing inequity in the U.S. school system—inequality that, as Gloria Ladson-Billings argues

, represents an intergenerational debt that is the result of long-standing disparities in funding, educational quality, and political agency that have shaped Black and brown communities.

It should worry us that, as a nation, the United States seems to be invested in tearing down the enormous possibility and promise of public education. In retelling that our children's opportunities have been irredeemably destroyed, we impair the possibility of collective inspiration for how to move forward. Instead of seeing and building on children's cultural and intellectual capacities, we are stuck in a swamp of behindness that creates an urgency of "catching up." This swamp spawns policy initiatives that seek to control and punish rather than contribute to and develop.

What is important now is whether we are prepared to shift how we support public education and the learning of all our nation's children. Are we ready to begin rejecting the repetition of the crisis narrative and begin building a new story? A narrative that is honest about what has happened—over decades—and where we are now? One that is aimed toward building up, not tearing down? If so, this narrative must center the children themselves and the teachers who labor to support their thriving. It must be one that leads to solutions.

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Good teaching is fundamental to a national project of public education that would prioritize students' flourishing. But instead of recognizing and making possible the work of teaching, we disdain the profession by withholding respect, necessary resources, and appropriate compensation. Understandably, teachers are leaving this essential work. An analysis carried out by the Learning Policy Institute for the 2020–21 and 2021–22 school years estimated that 10 percent of teaching positions were either vacant or filled by underqualified teachers.

The problems this nation needs to confront are undeniably complex, inextricably interconnected, and rooted in shameful histories. But we can turn the page on the harmful national narrative that has eroded public education and begin creating a new one. We can start with three steps.

- Launch a major national initiative to recruit and retain a diverse teaching force and provide the high-quality preparation that teaching requires. This teaching force should reflect the population of the United States. Base the preparation of these new teachers on what is known about the importance of caring relationships, of supporting the development of positive identities, of understanding subject matter in ways suited for helping others learn it, of connections to families and communities, and of the complex practices of equitable teaching.
- Add to this effort the development of a diverse cadre of paraprofessional educators from the community who can be prepared to assist in supporting students' learning and in caring for their well-being. Increase the ratio of adults who truly see and listen to young people. These paraprofessionals could also then be ready to pursue preparation to be teachers. Elevate the respect that such roles would command, through appropriate compensation and regard.
- Create a workday for teachers that honors the complexity of what they do and that creates space for them to analyze students' work and progress, plan next steps, and communicate and collaborate with others. Compensate this work in ways that are on par with other highly skilled professions that serve and support people.

These are big asks. But we cannot afford to renew our commitment to public education—and to our nation's children—on the cheap. Recycling the crisis narrative and proposing to respond with Band-Aids will surely fail. We know enough to do better, and this is the time to come together, across communities, to construct a new narrative of promise and growth.