School is (whisper it) a form of child care [1]

And child care, at its best, fosters children's development. So how did we come to treat them so differently?
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EXCERPTS

This summer, as debate raged among lawmakers, school districts and parents about whether it was safe to send kids back to school, something strange happened in Howard County, Md.

The Howard County school system decided to remain remote for at least the first semester. But to help parents deal with the lack of in-person care for their children, the county offered elementary school students a spot in parks and recreation programs, which provide "support for virtual learning assignments" along with "work sessions" and "crafts, physical activities, and games" — activities not totally unlike, say, school.

Little mention was made of the adults who will supervise the children during this child care. There was no hand-wringing about classroom configurations or safety guidelines. The catch? Unlike regular public school, which is guaranteed and free, the spots were limited — and cost $219 each week for a full day.

Similar programs have been created in places such as Texas, Vermont, Boston and New York City. Even before the school year began, child care providers never shut down in many places and were mostly left on their own to figure out how to keep their doors open while keeping everyone safe.

What is going on? Why would we endlessly debate the safety of putting children in classrooms, but put them in day care settings without anyone batting an eye — and certainly with no national debate?

In reality, there is no magical distinction that leaves children and adults immune to the coronavirus in a child care setting but not in a school. And yet throughout the pandemic we've operated as if there is.

It has taken a once-in-a-lifetime crisis to reveal what was always true: School is — whisper it — a form of child care; child care, at its best, fosters children's development.

We have long drawn a sharp distinction where there shouldn't be one. School is, first and foremost, about education. But it is also a safe place for parents to send their children while they're at work. That fact became torturously clear as school was yanked away, throwing families into chaos. At the same time, while child care allows parents of young children to go to work, the early years are also critical for children's development, making the educational aspects crucial.

The dichotomy we've set up between the two doesn't serve anyone now, but it didn't work under normal circumstances, either. Separating child care from the larger K-12 educational system forces many of us to live with an expensive, patchwork, private system for children up to age 5. And ignoring the fact that school is a place where children both learn and are kept safe while their parents work means we haven't reconciled short school days and academic calendars with a typical working parent's schedule.

How did we ever let such a bifurcated system grow so established in the first place? The story begins, for a University of Pennsylvania education historian, Jonathan Zimmerman, when formal school was first established in this country. In the 1800s, school was transformed state by state from a few weeks of instruction by a teenage girl in a one-room house into a system of formal classrooms with grades and professional teachers. Educational reformers like Horace Mann and Henry Barnard insisted that children needed more formal schooling in order to be informed citizens upholding democracy.

But that same reform push also excluded the nation's youngest children. When "school" still meant a one-room schoolhouse, working mothers were happy to send babies along with their siblings — which doesn't mean that this was a good outcome. "They would park the babies in front of the fireplace and the babies would fall asleep and fall backward," Mr. Zimmerman said. "Kids were injured." Horace Mann insisted that babies ought to remain at home, to allow the other children to get a better shot at a real education.

"Nobody's wrong here," Mr. Zimmerman said. "Mom's right that we need a place for the 6-month-old, and Horace Mann is right that kids don't actually belong in the schoolhouse."

But no one swooped in to help Mom get what she needed — even as a broad consensus formed across the country that all children above

the age of 6 had a right to a publicly financed education. “Public support for education starting in grade 1 has never really been a question,” Mr. Zimmerman said, even if we’ve frequently — and vehemently — fought over the particulars of how it’s carried out. School was never about alleviating a burden for parents. It was, for a new republic, based on the idea that the country needed an educated population to make democracy function. It was a civic service.

Child care, on the other hand, was guided by an entirely different logic. “There’s a common thread that runs through the history of child care in this country,” said Chris Herbst, an Arizona State University associate professor who studies child care policy. “And that’s employment.”

Mothers have always worked outside the home. During Mann’s time, they were in mills and factories alongside men. Their presence in the workplace then was controversial, as it remains today. Convincing the public that there should be a service available to take care of their kids while they worked was “a really heavy lift,” Mr. Zimmerman said.

In fact, mothers didn’t get any help from the government until the government needed them to work. During the Great Depression, the Works Progress Administration operated a network of child care centers aimed at helping unemployed mothers get jobs. Then, in the midst of World War II, President Franklin Roosevelt built a network of centers across the country. By then, men were fighting abroad and the ranks of childless women were running thin. But without child care, the nation was subjected to an array of horror stories about what happened when mothers went to work, such as children locked in cars near factories or chained to trailer homes.

And so, between 1943 and 1946, the country had a publicly funded, universal child care system built on the idea that women needed to leave the home to keep America running. It was “one of the earliest examples of child care policy in this country,” Mr. Herbst said. And it sprung directly from an economic need. “It was not designed specifically with education goals or child development goals in mind,” Mr. Herbst said. “It was all about parent employment.”

The centers shut down when the war ended, and the country has yet to create a universal child care program since. It has barely even invested public resources in it. But the few times it has, work has nearly always been the driving priority. In the 1990s, the federal government created programs like the Child Care & Development Block Grant and child care subsidies in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program with the goal of “quickly moving mostly unmarried mothers with young children from welfare to work,” Mr. Herbst said. “These were employment programs.”

So child care has always by default been ensnared in the thicket of debate over the role women are meant to play at home and in public. School has rarely come into conflict with that debate. The basic premise that children deserve to learn — and that education is important for the country as a whole — hasn’t been disputed.

And yet the two suffer from being divided from each other. “In both realms, we’re only having half the necessary conversation,” Mr. Herbst said.

Even before the pandemic, school misaligned with parents’ needs. The school day barely resembles the typical demands of a job. The median school day ends at 2:50 p.m., and nearly all are closed by 3:30, yet most of us work until 5 or 6 p.m. When functioning normally, schools still close for nearly 29 days during the school year, more than two workweeks longer than what the average private-sector worker gets in paid vacation and holidays — and that’s not even touching on summer vacation.

At the same time, an academic consensus has emerged about the importance of the first few years of a child’s life to brain development and later life outcomes. To neglect the developmental, if not educational, importance of high-quality child care is to do an enormous disservice to the millions of children who are in child care on a typical (non-pandemic) day.

Now this arbitrary dividing line has left child care providers all but abandoned while struggling to safely stay open and pick up the slack when school districts have decided to go remote. The fact that K-12 schools get public funding and oversight means they are also subject to public debate. Child care has been relegated to a lesser status and has less power to make demands on lawmakers, even if the demand is simply for some canisters of disinfectant wipes.

The answer is not that we must drag K-12 education down to child care’s level — to say that teachers are merely babysitters who deserve to make barely over minimum wage and that parents should be forced to pay for school themselves. The answer is to make child care more like public school. What Howard County is doing might seem strange at first glance, but in fact, school districts offering child care for school-aged children could lead us to the right place.

We still don’t know what this school year is going to look like. It’s yet to be seen if schools invite students back in only to shut down as cases spread, or if they’re able to put in place enough safety measures to keep the virus at bay. But when we emerge on the other side, it would be foolish to return to normal, to a system where children’s needs are neglected at young ages and parents’ needs go unheeded at older ones.

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