What is school for? [1]

Kids need it for education. Families also need it for child care.
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Source: The Vox
Format: Article
Publication Date: 3 Feb 2022

AVAILABILITY
Access online [2]

EXCERPTS

When Covid-19 first hit, teachers were praised to the skies, recalled Maria Salinas, who teaches fifth grade reading in Florida. “You know: ‘Hey, you guys are doing a good job. It’s so wonderful what you’re doing.’”

Now, she’s hearing the polar opposite: “Teachers are lazy. They don’t want to work.”

Also a mother of four, Salinas finds herself at the center of an ongoing conflict among parents, lawmakers, and educators in which no one is satisfied and everyone is mad. Parents blame teachers for keeping schools closed. Teachers counter that the blame is misplaced — after all, it’s hardly their fault if a school has to shut down because so many staff are sick. At the same time, teachers have concerns about keeping their own families safe amid an ongoing pandemic, and about the burden society seems to be placing on their shoulders.

At the core of the conflict is the fact that parents don’t just need school to educate their kids — something that can, in many cases, be accomplished virtually (though some studies suggest that remote learning is less effective than in-person class time). They also need school, controversial though this may be, as a source of child care — it’s a supervised place kids can go while parents work, and at least in the case of public school, it’s free. This is the function that has truly broken down in the pandemic, with hard lockdowns giving way to rolling quarantines and intractable staff shortages that have left working parents constantly on edge, wondering when the next closure notice will send them scrambling for a backup plan.

The conflict between teachers and parents, however, obscures the crucial fact that school was failing as a source of child care long before the pandemic. The average school day ends before 3 pm, in a country where many parents are working until 6 or later. Kids are out of school for months in the summer, weeks in the winter, and many, many days in between. The result is stress for parents, expenses many families can ill afford, and in some cases, kids going unsupervised when they are too young to safely be alone. “We all act as though child care no longer becomes all that critical once kids enter kindergarten,” said Chris Herbst, a professor at Arizona State University who studies the economics of child care. “That’s not right.”

Like many problems exposed by the pandemic, this one is fixable. The solution is pretty simple: lengthen school, shorten work, or both. Doing that, however, will require a level of political will that hasn’t always been in evidence where families and care are concerned, even when the upheaval around the virus shows how necessary it is.

The conflicts over school started long before the pandemic

Americans tend to draw a stark distinction between child care and school. “Child care,” the thinking goes, is something for infants and toddlers. For most parents, its purpose is “to provide a safe and healthy environment for my kids so that I can work without having to worry,” Herbst said. Child care is also extremely expensive. While some subsidies and programs for children of low-income families exist, most parents have to pay out of pocket, a cost that can be more than the average rent. Proposals for universal child care have been floated in the past, but they’ve failed, in part because of an abiding American belief, especially among conservatives, that young children should be cared for at home, by their mothers.

Then there’s school. Public education in America was conceived as a way of creating a more informed citizenry, as Bryce Covert writes at the New York Times. Despite various controversies, public school has generally enjoyed wide support in this country. It starts when kids are about 5 (though public preschool starts earlier in some areas), and it comes at no direct cost to parents, since it’s paid for by tax dollars. Teachers and other adults who work in schools are often adamant that they are not child care workers, perhaps in part because child care is controversial and looked down upon in America, and child care workers are paid extremely poorly.

In reality, however, there’s always been a lot of overlap between the two realms. “School is — whisper it — a form of child care,” Covert writes; “child care, at its best, fosters children’s development.”

Children are learning from the very beginning, whether from parents, family members, nannies, or day care workers. On the flip side, they don’t suddenly stop needing to be cared for once they turn 5. Kindergartners may be ready to learn to read and write, but they also need

someone to keep them safe and supervised; most social workers say children aren't ready to be on their own for extended periods of time until they turn 12.

Because of this, parents have always relied on school as a form of child care. "School plays an enormous role in parents' labor supply," Herbst said. Economically speaking, you can think of public school as a "100 percent child care subsidy" — for the hours of the day that kids are in school, parents' direct child care costs go down to zero. As a result, parents often rejoin the workforce or start working more hours when children are old enough to go to school because they suddenly have a source of free, reliable care.

There's always been a catch, though. Child care exists to support parents' work, so day care centers are typically open year-round, often until 5 or 6 in the evening. Schools … aren't.

As of 2016, the median school day in America ended at 2:50 pm, according to a report by the Center for American Progress (CAP). Nearly all schools were closed by 3:30. Meanwhile, the largest school districts were closed for an average of 29 days during the school year for holidays and other reasons — some schools, for example, close on the first day of hunting season. That's not even counting summer vacation, which typically lasts more than two months.

When kids aren't in school but parents are at work, families either have to pay for care or leave kids alone. Child care for school-aged children can be costly — summer camp, for example, averages $76 per day — and hard to find, with only around 45 percent of elementary schools offering before- or after-school care as of 2016. The cost is especially unaffordable for low-income workers, who are also more likely to have unpredictable schedules and lack paid time off, according to CAP.

A lack of formal care, meanwhile, can shift the burden to older siblings, who then miss out on their own homework or after-school activities, said Khalilah Harris, CAP's managing director for K-12 education policy. If younger children have to be left entirely alone before or after school, they may miss out on meals, baths, or clean clothes for school. "The lack of supervision can cause children to have a school day that isn't as productive as it would be if there were an adult just kind of checking in on them," Harris said.

Parents, meanwhile, are left with constant worry about their kids, which can make it hard to be productive at work. Not only that, but leaving kids alone can expose parents to legal consequences, even if they have little choice in the matter. This is an especially big concern for Black and other parents of color, who are disproportionately likely to be investigated by child protective services and potentially separated from their children.

For decades, the lack of accessible child care options before and after school was forcing parents to make "very tough decisions" about how to support their kids financially while still keeping them safe, Harris said. Then the pandemic hit.

Covid-19 sent an already precarious system into full collapse

If school had once functioned as a child care subsidy for parents, Covid-19 essentially reversed the situation. With classes remote, "the burden of caregiving sort of shifted from school to almost exclusively parents," Herbst said. Parents had to be on call not just to provide care but also to assist in education, since younger kids often couldn't fully participate in virtual learning without a parent directing them.

Remote learning added the equivalent of another full-time job onto the average mom's workday (fathers also did more child care, though not as much as moms). Some parents, especially single moms, ended up having to drop out of the workforce. Others just got really, really burnt out.

The situation has gotten better since 2020, but it's still pretty bad. During the week of January 10, for example, more than 7,400 schools closed their doors for at least one day, according to the data service Burbio. Even when schools are open, the ever-present threat of an omicron case or exposure hangs darkly over parents' plans.

Salinas, the Florida teacher, has seen it from both sides of the desk, as it were. She's frustrated when parents send their kids to school sick, exposing others to the virus. At the same time, she understands that they often have little choice because they have no time off to stay home with a sick kid.

She and her family got Covid-19 last year, while she was pregnant, and she had to take more than two weeks off to care for her youngest child. All of that came out of her maternity leave, she said. "None of our time was covered."

Now, with omicron continuing to drive quarantines and staff shortages, Salinas faces blowback from parents who think school closures are teachers' fault. In some places, like Chicago, teachers unions have pushed for stricter Covid-19 protocols or a return to remote learning during virus surges. Some have also pushed back against the idea that it's teachers' responsibility to provide child care — potentially putting their own families at risk — so other parents can work.

However, teachers have more bargaining power in some places than others, and not all unions have pushed for more remote instruction. Meanwhile, many school closures during the omicron wave had less to do with teachers' concerns than with the simple fact that with so many staff out sick, it became impossible to operate a school. "Some things are out of our hands," Salinas said. "We're trying to make everything normal again, in a sense, and it's not."

There are ways to fix the problem without overburdening teachers

If omicron continues to recede, then schools might return to something closer to normal as spring approaches. But normal wasn't very good — working parents were already stretched thin long before the pandemic. As we continue to navigate (and, hopefully, one day emerge from) the public health crisis, families and educators need something better.

One way to fix the mismatch between kids' school and parents' work would be to make school longer. For example, CAP has proposed the creation of a 9-to-5 school day to better align public education with parents' child care needs. That doesn't mean kids would be sitting at a desk for eight hours, Harris said — rather, the extra time would be spent on art, sports, and other areas of interest for kids. Many middle-class and wealthy students already participate in after-school activities based around their interests; an extended school day would allow public schools to offer these for free.

Teachers, who are overworked and underpaid as it is, shouldn't be expected to bear the burden of a longer school day, Harris said. Instead, other community members could be hired to lead arts or sports programming according to their strengths, or schedules could be staggered so that some educators worked from 9 to 3 and others from 12 to 5, for example. Such a setup would ensure that "all students have proper care, but that they also have the type of academic enrichment and programming that more affluent students have," Harris said.

The question is how to pay for it. Districts could use money from the CARES Act or other pandemic recovery funds to expand their school days, Harris said. However, there's yet to be a real concerted push, at the state or federal level, to change school schedules. A few school districts and charter schools have done experiments, but for a broad-based reform of school hours, "you would need certainly more public awareness about how this can work," Harris said.

The other path to matching up children's school and parents' jobs is to help parents work less. Paid leave is certainly part of that conversation: The US still lags far behind other wealthy countries in this area, and while the pandemic led to more generous offerings by some employers, some of those have since been scaled back. "When we got the virus, there was no help from the government like there was last year," Salinas said.

Beyond paid leave, shortening parents' work hours would require fundamental changes by employers, policymakers, or both. A universal basic income could reduce the hours parents need to work in order to support their families. Employers also need to be involved in the conversation by ensuring that the schedules they ask of their employees are compatible with family life, Harris said. While some white-collar jobs have offered more flexibility, days off, and the ability to work from home since the pandemic began, companies that employ lower-paid, service-sector workers have not necessarily followed suit. "There are a number of ways that industry is not being called to the mat in the way that they ought to be," Harris said.

In an ideal world, both school and work would change to help families live more sustainable lives. In this world, however, we're forced — at least for now — to navigate a broken system, frequently turning on each other when it inevitably fails. Until we can make broader changes, what many working parents and teachers have been asking for throughout this pandemic is a little understanding of the challenges they're going through and how hard they're working to make mismatched pieces fit. As Salinas put it, "Everybody needs to give each other a little bit of grace."

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