



CULTURE

In Defense of Our Teachers




When it comes to the daunting question of reopening schools, America's educators deserve a plan, not a trap.

By Dave Grohl



Guy Le Querrec / Magnum

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I hate to break it to you, but I was a terrible student.

Each day, I desperately waited for the final bell to ring so that I could be released from the confines of my stuffy, windowless classroom and run home to my guitar. It was no fault of the Fairfax County Public Schools system, mind you; it did the best it could. I was just stubbornly disengaged, impeded by a raging case of ADD and an insatiable desire to play music. Far from being a model student, I tried my best to maintain focus, but eventually left school halfway through 11th grade to follow my dreams of becoming a professional touring musician (not advised). I left behind countless missed opportunities. To this day, I'm haunted by a recurring dream that I'm back in those crowded hallways, now struggling to graduate as a 51-year-old man, and anxiously wake in a pool of my own sweat. You can take the boy out of school, but you can't take school out of the boy! So, with me being a high-school dropout, you would imagine that the current debate surrounding the reopening of schools wouldn't register so much as a blip on my rock-and-roll radar, right? Wrong.

My mother was a public-school teacher.

[Read: Colleges are getting ready to blame their students](#)

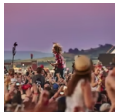
As a single mother of two, she tirelessly devoted her life to the service of others, both at home and at work. From rising before dawn to ensure that my sister and I were bathed, dressed, and fed in time to catch the bus to grading papers well into the night, long after her dinner had gone cold, she rarely had a moment to herself. All this while working multiple jobs to supplement her meager \$35,000 annual salary. Bloomingdale's, Servpro, SAT prep, GED prep—she even once coached soccer for a \$400 stipend, funding our first family trip to New York City, where we stayed at the St. Regis Hotel and ordered drinks at its famous King Cole Bar so that we could fill up on the free hors d'oeuvres we otherwise could not afford. Unsurprisingly, her devoted parenting mirrored her technique as a teacher. Never one to just point at a blackboard and recite lessons for kids to mindlessly memorize, she was an engaging educator, invested in the well-being of each and every student who sat in her class.

And at an average of 32 students a class, that was no small feat. She was one of those teachers who became a mentor to many, and her students remembered her long after they had graduated, often bumping into her at the grocery store and erupting into a full recitation of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, like a flash mob in the produce aisle. I can't tell you how many of her former students I've met over the years who offer anecdotes from my mother's classroom. Every kid should be so lucky to have that favorite teacher, the one who changes your life for the better. She helped generations of children learn how to learn, and, like most other teachers, exhibited a selfless concern for others. Though I was never her student, she will forever be my favorite teacher.

[Read: How Trump closed down the schools](#)

It takes a certain kind of person to devote their life to this difficult and often-thankless job. I know because I was raised in a community of them. I have mowed their lawns, painted their apartments, even babysat their children, and I'm convinced that they are as essential as any other essential workers. Some even raise rock stars! Tom Morello of Rage Against the Machine, Adam Levine, Josh Groban, and Haim are all children of school workers (with hopefully more academically rewarding results than mine). Over the years, I have come to notice that teachers share a special bond, because there aren't too many people who truly understand their unique challenges—challenges that go far beyond just pen and paper. Today, those challenges could mean life or death for some.

RECOMMENDED READING



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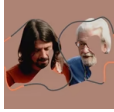
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When it comes to the daunting—and ever more politicized—question of reopening schools amid the coronavirus pandemic, the worry for our children’s well-being is paramount. Yet teachers are also confronted with a whole new set of dilemmas that most people would not consider. “There’s so much more to be addressed than just opening the doors and sending them back home,” my mother tells me over the phone. Now 82 and retired, she runs down a list of concerns based on her 35 years of experience: “masks and distancing, temperature checks, crowded busing, crowded hallways, sports, air-conditioning systems, lunchrooms, public restrooms, janitorial staff.” Most schools already struggle from a lack of resources; how could they possibly afford the mountain of safety measures that will need to be in place? And although the average age of a schoolteacher in the United States is in the early 40s, putting them in a lower-risk group, many career teachers, administrators, cafeteria workers, nurses, and janitors are older and at higher risk. Every school’s working faculty is a considerable percentage of its population, and should be safeguarded appropriately. I can only imagine if my mother were now forced to return to a stuffy, windowless classroom. What would we learn from that lesson? When I ask what she would do, my mother replies, “Remote learning for the time being.”

[Read: Reopening schools was an afterthought](#)

Remote learning comes with more than a few of its own complications, especially for working-class and single parents who are dealing with the logistical problem of balancing jobs with children at home. Uneven availability of teaching materials and online access, technical snafus, and a lack of socialization all make for a less-than-ideal learning experience. But most important, remote setups overseen by caretakers, with a teacher on the other end doing their best to educate distracted kids who prefer screens used for games, not math, make it perfectly clear that not everyone with a laptop and a dry-erase board is cut out to be a teacher. That specialized skill is the X factor. I know this because I have three children of my own, and my remote classroom was more *Welcome Back, Kotter* than *Dead Poets Society*. Like I tell my children, “You don’t really want daddy helping, unless you want to get an F!” Remote learning is an

inconvenient and hopefully temporary solution. But as much as Donald Trump's conductor-less orchestra would love to see the country prematurely open schools in the name of rosy optics (ask a science teacher what they think about White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany's comment that "science should not stand in the way"), it would be foolish to do so at the expense of our children, teachers, and schools.

[Read: Why schools can't reopen in the fall](#)

Every teacher has a "plan." Don't they deserve one too? My mother had to come up with three separate lesson plans every single day (public speaking, AP English, and English 10), because that's what teachers do: They provide you with the necessary tools to survive. Who is providing them with a set of their own? America's teachers are caught in a trap, set by indecisive and conflicting sectors of failed leadership that have never been in their position and can't possibly relate to the unique challenges they face. I wouldn't trust the U.S. secretary of percussion to tell me how to play "Smells Like Teen Spirit" if they had never sat behind a drum set, so why should any teacher trust Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos to tell them how to teach, without her ever having sat at the head of a class? (Maybe she should switch to the drums.) Until you have spent countless days in a classroom devoting your time and energy to becoming that lifelong mentor to generations of otherwise disengaged students, you must listen to those who have. Teachers want to teach, not die, and we should support and protect them like the national treasures that they are. For without them, where would we be?

May we show these tireless altruists a little altruism in return. I would for my favorite teacher. Wouldn't you?
