How Will America Recover From a Broken School Year?

A discussion about the grave consequences of missed learning — and the urgency of keeping kids in the classroom.

Artwork by Erin Jang. Photograph by Jamie Chung for The New York Times.

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By Emily Bazelon

Sept. 8, 2021, 5:00 a.m. ET

A year and a half into the pandemic, the crucial and irreplaceable role that school plays in students' lives has never been clearer. In contrast to last fall, when school buildings in some parts of the country closed for long periods (mostly in blue cities and towns), a consensus has emerged this year in favor of bringing as many students as possible back to the classroom. But the country remains divided about which measures are required to do this safely. Infections are already forcing mass quarantines, and fear and high prevalence rates may further threaten in-person schooling once again — despite the indisputable evidence of the severe cost to kids.

How should schools adapt to the wide-ranging effects of the pandemic? How can they address the devastating inequality in American education that the pandemic both revealed and magnified? How do we help kids recover and thrive? We brought together six experts to explore these questions.

The Participants

Brian Coleman is the chairman of the counseling department at Jones College Prep, a selective public high school in Chicago. In 2019, he won the award for National School Counselor of the Year.

Andrea Hunley is the principal of Center for Inquiry School 2, an award-winning public magnet school in Indianapolis for kindergarten through eighth grade.

Meira Levinson is a professor of education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and former middle-school teacher in the Atlanta and Boston public schools.

Pedro Martinez is the superintendent of the San Antonio Independent School District.

Jenny Radesky is a developmental behavioral pediatrician and assistant professor of pediatrics at the University of Michigan Medical School. Her research focuses on how the parent-child relationship and digital media shape social-emotional outcomes for children.

Penny Schwinn is the education commissioner for Tennessee. She has previously worked as a principal and served as an elected school board member.

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How Have Kids Fared?

Emily Bazelon: Meira, you've closely reviewed the research on the effects of the pandemic for kids and teenagers, for an article in The Lancet. What does it show?

Meira Levinson: There's a lot we don't know yet, but we do have scattered studies and some standardized test data from various states. And those pretty consistently show that kids knew less and performed less well on tests at the end of the last school year than kids in the equivalent grades have performed in previous years.

Kids who come from more historically marginalized communities — poor students, Black and Latino and Native American students, students with disabilities — on average experienced a larger gap, compared with previous years, than kids who come from wealthier families or who are white or affluent and/or who attend private school.

We also know that entry into community colleges and other two-year college programs is down, though entry to four-year colleges, particularly at selective schools, has not dropped much. So what we see is greater stratification of the American educational system. These inequities have been present for centuries, but they have been very much exacerbated.

Penny Schwinn: It's really difficult. It's also no one's fault. Educators did herculean things through the year, and still students' scores went down and achievement went down. In our state, among all our economically disadvantaged students, third through eighth grade, one in seven is on grade level in language arts and one in 10 is on grade level in math. Among the biggest drops we saw occurred in districts that also had the longest periods of remote instruction in the last school year. This has no doubt exacerbated achievement gaps that have existed in our state for years. For example, I've got only 3 percent of low-income students in Memphis who can do math on grade level in eighth grade.

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For me, as someone whose whole career is based in low-income communities, it's scary to look at the data. I know in 20 years, we're not going to make excuses for the future adults and say, "Oh, but those were Covid kids."

Pedro Martinez: We saw sharp differences in academic achievement in our district between our children who had remote school and our children who were there in person — in some grades in math, remote school led to a 30-point drop in proficiency rates on the state assessment tests from 2019 to 2021. This was evident in other districts in Texas too. I keep saying that the drop in scores is not a reflection of my students' ability, it's not a reflection of the work of my teachers. It really was the conditions last year.

The share of low-income students who were in remote school at the end of 2020 was 64 percent. It was 48 percent for high-income students.

Schwinn: In Tennessee, about 80 percent of families chose to send their kids back in person last year, while 20 percent did not. There were real trade-offs. Where students were less likely to be in school, I saw more kids hit by cars, who were in ATV accidents or who were gunshot victims — kinds of tragedies that might not have occurred if those kids had been in a school building. In many ways, deciding whether or not to send your child to school during a Covid surge — it was an impossible choice.

Jenny Radesky: Whether students had access to virtual or in-person school had a big impact on their mental health. In some districts here, we saw some kids return to in-person school in fall 2020 and flourish once they went back. We conducted a survey of about 300 parents of Michigan elementary school students, and found that remote learners had significantly higher hyperactivity, peer problems, defiance and sleep difficulties compared with children attending in-person school.

School is so organizing and grounding for kids. I focus on kids with autism, A.D.H.D., executive-functioning deficits, trauma, learning disabilities and developmental delays. They see the world in atypical ways, and they are often misunderstood. Without the environment of school, which helps them contain their thoughts and emotions, many of my patients were totally dysregulated. I heard story after story about sleep problems and regression into behaviors that children hadn't exhibited in a long time. They just didn't have access to the same therapies and role modeling from peers. I had to double the number of hours I worked with patients to meet the need.

I also saw huge disparities in the support kids had. I practice both in Ann Arbor and in Ypsilanti, which has a higher rate of child poverty and of incarceration and substance abuse. The General Motors plant there closed in 2010. During lockdown, it was the families from Ann Arbor who called and said, I need help — please get me a new referral to a therapist. I heard much less often from families in Ypsilanti, who perhaps didn't *expect* help.

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I really struggled with reaching those families, hearing what sort of support they needed — and then trying to plug them into therapists and psychologists, who just are so much less available right now, particularly for Medicaid patients, because of the huge demand.

In our children's hospital in Ann Arbor, we saw an 18 percent increase in inpatient psychiatric consults. The inpatient unit became kind of a holding area for these kids, with more than a doubling of eating-disorder patients.

The number of mental-health-related emergency- room visits for 5-to-11-year-olds went up by 24 percent from April to October 2020, compared with the same period in 2019.

I hear from primary-care doctors who saw kids with no history of any mental-health issues who were exhibiting repetitive behaviors, not just hand-washing, but also chewing their clothes or fingernails or rocking back and forth. Many children were more irritable, while others seemed as if they were shutting down and hibernating — as if they had lost their spark. These doctors said they were prescribing more antidepressants and escalating stimulant doses to help kids with virtual learning.

In terms of what the research shows, I think the best study came out recently in JAMA Pediatrics, which pooled studies from across the globe and found clinically elevated depression in 25 percent of children and adolescents, and anxiety in 20 percent. This is double the usual estimates for children of between 11 and 13 percent.

Andrea Hunley: At my school, we have about 450 kids, kindergarten through eighth grade, and some of them have been out of the building since March 2020. We're more than a month into the new school year, and a big pattern is that kids really are struggling to communicate their needs, whether that's the ability to handle disappointment or needing support to regulate their own emotions. At home, even siblings weren't interacting a lot with one another because they were on screens a lot of the time. We see kids screaming, crying, stomping, throwing things, pushing, shoving, all of which disrupt the learning environment.

So a big piece that we've been doing is modeling for students what conflict resolution looks like. For example, we had a conflict on the bus with two middle-school girls. I gave them a sheet that says: "I feel ___. I need ___. Fill in the blank." They needed that level of support to have what was once a very basic level of communication with each other.

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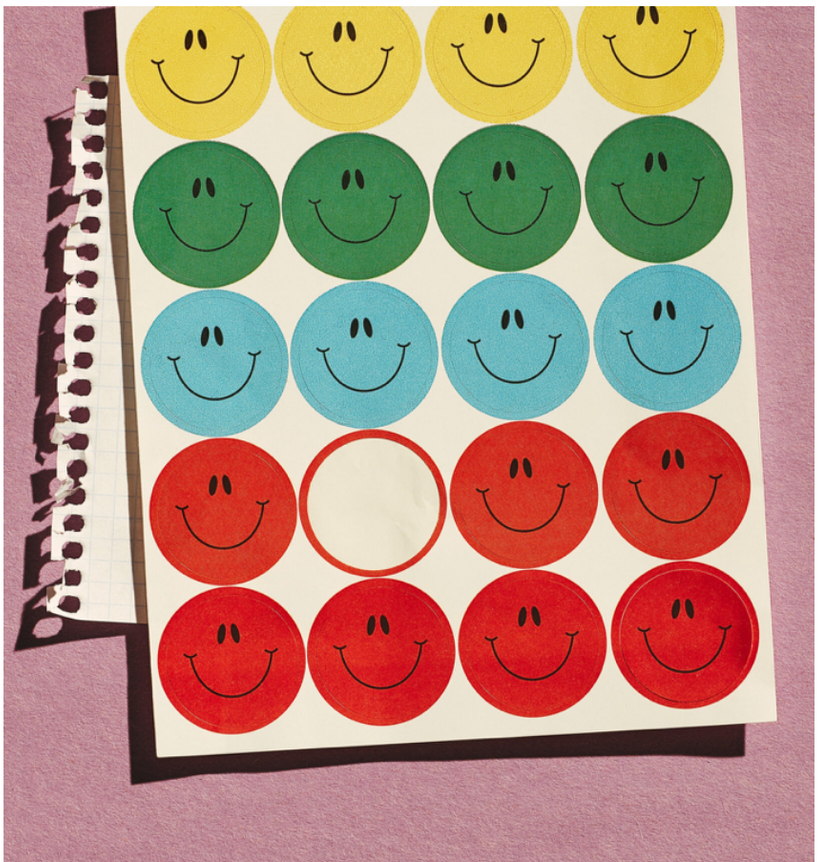
Another big piece is our advisory program. Middle-school students are in small groups of 12 to 15, with mixed ages, that they stay with for three years. We tried to do it during the pandemic, but it just didn't feel the same in the virtual environment. When we ask students, "What did you miss the most about school?" our middle-school students say it was our advisory program. So for this year, we built in additional advisory time. The students can voice their worries and fears, and that has been really important in these first weeks.

Brian Coleman: I'm the department chairman for a team of six counselors, in a school of about 1,900 students. In contrast to what I heard from Jenny, a lot of my students whom I would consider more socially awkward or antisocial thrived in the pandemic. Some pressures and stresses fell away. For students particularly affected by racial trauma as part of the school experience, or major incidents of racism in the country at large, many of them were able to thrive outside an environment they found triggering.

But also, some of my historically marginalized students, we just didn't hear from, for 18 or 19 months. We could not reach them. And that's very scary.

Levinson: Research shows that one to three million students went missing from school last year. They just didn't show up in any way. In addition, we found that the average kid in the United States lost out on 55 days of school, almost a third of the year, between March 2020 and March 2021. Those are days of zero contact, not even counting the days where they only had, say, a half-hour of circle time or a brief check-in.



Artwork by Erin Jang. Photograph by Jamie Chung for The New York Times.

What Does It Take to Get Kids Back to School or Keep Them There?

Bazelon: How much hesitancy are you seeing from parents about sending kids back to school in person this year?

Martinez: The death rate from Covid in my community was up to five times higher than in the affluent areas around us. The parents in my district are the grocery workers and hotel workers who can't work from home. We are very sensitive to their safety concerns. Over the summer, we brought them in to show them what we're doing. We added 30 instructional days, and we concentrated on students who have been remote or who just struggle. We ended the session with almost 70 percent of our elementary-school kids in person and 55 percent in person overall.

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Hunley: For much of school last year, more than 20 percent of the students in my building were virtual. Now we don't have a virtual option. Parents who want virtual instruction have to enroll in a charter school that our district partners with.

For me, getting kids back meant calling every single one of those parents. I brought them in to tour. I talked to them about our low spread rate — we had two students in the first four weeks test positive for Covid. But we had to make individualized plans that they felt comfortable with. I've got students who eat lunch outside every day with their parents, because that's the riskiest time of the day, when they take their masks off. We make these individual accommodations for families.

It's also critical that staff members feel safe, because if they are anxious, that's going to be communicated to the families and to the students. On Friday, I walked into one of my fourth-grade classrooms, and the teacher was lying on the floor and saying to the students: "I need to do some grounding. I was just feeling myself getting a little frustrated and a little frazzled. And so if you would like to join me, we're going to spend three minutes doing deep breathing. If you don't want to join, you can sit at your desk." Then those students have the language to say to their parents: "I was feeling really overwhelmed in class today. But I knew that I could take a moment to ground myself."

At the end of 2020, the share of children a who had access to fully in-person school whose parents are Republican was 51%. The share whose parents are Democrats was 35%.

Coleman: If schools don't invest in their staff meaningfully, it's going to be very difficult for that staff then to invest in students. As counselors, we've done targeted professional development for teachers about students' social and emotional well-being and what signs of trouble to look for — a shift in the baseline, from bubbly to withdrawn, or calm to disruptive.

We also talk a lot about setting boundaries, so teachers help students understand that they're not the primary facilitator for support. If something is wrong, it's time to reach out to us as counselors or to an administrator or other support staff. We're putting videos on YouTube in which counselors introduce themselves, or record lessons. It's another way to strengthen the link between home and school and make sure everyone has access to the same information.

Schwinn: In Tennessee, we do educator surveys, and we added some Covid questions this year. There's a real guilt from educators mixed with a sense of duty and responsibility. I hear people say: "I don't think I can keep doing this. And I know that I've got to, and that this is my identity, but I'm exhausted." I worry about that underlying current. But it's also impressive that on this year's survey, we saw relatively little change in how teachers responded to questions around job satisfaction and intent to stay in the profession.

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One thing that has been largely missing from the national conversation is the very different perspective of rural communities. In Tennessee, they led the conversation that got kids back into classrooms a year ago. Parents said, I want my kid to go to school.

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They also said, I don't want them to wear a mask. I work with 147 superintendents, and they respond to what their families want.

Bazelon: Do you feel the country is making in-person school a national priority? Is there enough urgency about how important this is?

Martinez: I just have to say this: Anybody advocating for schools to close before bars and restaurants — it is, to me, the worst thing to do to a family. The amount of stress school closure causes, especially for families in poverty. I'm sorry, it's just so wrong.

Coleman: There has been a lot of conversation about a return to

normalcy. And that has concerned me, because before Covid, the level of awareness and engagement in education as an institution was very disparate and fractured. If you thrived in school before the pandemic, then sure, returning to normal sounds great. But if you felt marginalized by race or class or sexuality or religion, then it sounds like a perpetuation of harm.

Should Schools Test Kids Academically?

Bazelon: Penny, can you explain why Tennessee decided last year to do the same standardized testing that you regularly do, in spite of the disruption of Covid? In other places, testing has been postponed out of concern that it's unfair or premature to assess how much students are learning given the constraints of the pandemic. What's the case for going ahead with assessments?

Schwinn: In Tennessee, the Legislature came back and did a special session to ensure that student testing would take place. The bill promised no negative consequences for any district, school or teacher as long as 80 percent of students took the assessment.

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We knew how important it was to have the cold, hard facts, and we knew that families really wanted to know how their kids were doing academically after a pandemic school year. Now that student scores are available, we've had more parents logging into our online family portal than we expected — all to find out how their child's scores compare to their previous scores.

Unless we have this good data that shows how our students are doing, we can't make informed decisions to ensure those students receive the additional support they need. And candidly, the business community is very important here. When they see the testing data, and they understand what it indicates for their future work force, they've pushed on the academic front and for the support that enable academic success — in opinion columns and conversations with legislators, for example.

Between 1 and 3 million students were 'lost' by schools in the last year. They never enrolled, showed up or logged in.

Hunley: At first, I was skeptical about testing during Covid, because I worried about adding stress for students, families and our staff. This was in March 2021. Students had to come into the building for the tests even if their families were keeping them home. And I was concerned that teachers would take it personally if kids didn't do as well. At the time, they thought the results might count in their annual evaluations and affect their pay, though that didn't happen in the end.

But my reluctance shifted because I came to see the value in having the data.

We are a school with 42 percent of students who are low-income, so we qualify for additional federal funds, and we are above the state average on all of our assessments. We are third in our school district for math and fourth in our school district for language-arts achievement. I'm really proud of that.

We set very specific achievement goals for our Black and Latino students. We wanted to increase the share of our Black students who are on grade level in language arts, and we hit our goal, with a rise from 33 percent to 42 percent. We focused on it and monitored every single week. When teachers circle around the room one more time, they should be stopping by a particular student's desk and making sure that she truly understands this concept.

Martinez: We made sure that none of the testing data was used against our teachers or children or our schools. But we thought that parents needed to know where we were at. Now we have a rich set of data, across the state.

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Hunley: We talked to the students about the testing. We said, This is like a pulse check. And the tests were untimed, which I think helped take away the pressure.

Schwinn: I have a third grader who took the state assessment test for the first time last year. And she was fine, because we didn't make it a big deal. The kids came in, they took the test on paper and then they had a Popsicle outside. When we took away the high stakes, it changed the way that people were engaged with the assessment. That's creating a very important conversation in our state about how to think about assessment differently moving forward.

How Should Schools Spend Their Federal Money?

Bazelon: Since last spring, Congress has allocated about $190 billion in new federal funding for schools. The money must be spent within three years. Pedro, how are you using this money in San Antonio?

Martinez: When we asked parents about how we should use our federal funds, the No. 1 need they described was mental health. I was going to focus a lot more on academics, but I had to listen to that. We put mental-health specialists in every one of our schools.

The rest of the money has been focused on extending the calendar with 30 additional instructional days this year, with the support of more than 90 percent of our parents and teachers. In our summer session, we did not do remediation. It was enrichment. The big challenge we saw in our test scores last year was in math. So a lot of our focus in the summer was on STEM as well as fine arts.

And every year, we're going to let parents and teachers at each school decide: How many additional instructional days do they need? If they want to add Saturday programs or evening programs, they can do that.

Crucially, we got our board and committee to support us in stretching the funds over four years. We could tell our schools and our community: We have a runway. And the mental-health specialists — I will find a way to make sure that they stay; we're not giving them back. We started reducing class size in schools where they were already struggling with that, pre-Covid, and I'm going to find a way to keep those resources in place.

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The number of students who were physically out of

school for 13 months starting in March 2020 was 25 million.

Levinson: Pedro, there are large districts that are not hiring new staff with the federal stimulus money. They say the three-year spending deadline means they cannot make long-term staffing commitments, so they are reluctant to hire. They're spending money instead on consultants. So how are you going ahead?

Martinez: We are doing the opposite. For example, we have consultants in our special-ed services, and parents were complaining that they were not always reliable and consistent. So we're taking advantage of the funding to phase out the consultants over time.

I'm sorry, but shame on me as a superintendent, and on my board, if we can't find ways to hire people we need with a four-year runway. We know the Biden administration is going to increase the amount of certain grants for schools over the next years. We can figure this out.

Bazelon: What about intensive tutoring? Research suggests that's an effective tool for helping students recover from the academic setbacks of the pandemic.

Schwinn: At the beginning of this year, our Legislature passed a bill creating a statewide tutoring program called the Tennessee ALL Corps. It's high-dosage tutoring, in small groups, so that we can have grade-level instruction in the classroom rather than remediation. Some districts piloted it in the spring with massively good results — they did not see the same academic declines as other places.

The research about tutoring is incredibly clear. It generally has to be two to three times per week with no more than three students in a group. We have a whole training program. So now we've guaranteed for districts that they get $700 per student per year for high-dosage tutoring.

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Like Pedro, we are hiring, because roughly 30 percent of our teachers are eligible for retirement, and we believe we can hire teachers from the pool of folks who are tutoring. It'll be a great way to get people into the profession.

And our retired teachers are coming back for the tutoring program, too, and we have many volunteers from our faith community. We plan to have 150,000 participants over three years, in a state of about a million students, focusing on those kids who are below grade level.

Bazelon: How much do you think that we should emphasize the hardship the pandemic has caused? How much will the struggles we see now for kids come out in the wash over time, because they really can be resilient? Some headlines say "The Kids Are Alright," and others say "The Kids Are Not Alright." Which message is more helpful?

Martinez: This has been my experience, over 20 years: We are not building widgets. Children learn in different ways. They respond in different ways. We know that, yes, poverty has almost a 100 percent correlation with being below grade level, regardless of what city you're in. But at the same time, if we provide the right supports for teachers, and we really partner with our families, our children exceed expectations.

With Covid continuing, I've asked my schools to have a backup plan in case the whole city shuts down. Because *we're* not going to shut down. We know how disruptive it is to our staff and families. In the meantime, let's figure out how to encourage families to get our children vaccinated. I'm seeing hesitation with my African American parents and some of my Latino communities. So I'm working with our health partners to provide workshops at the school on vaccination.

We didn't have any children hospitalized last year. But we're starting to see more of that across the city. If, God forbid, that happens under our watch to a child, I just, I don't. ...

In emergency-room trips for suicide attempts by 12-to-17-year-olds increased by 39.1% in winter 2021 compared with 2019.

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Hunley: This is my 10th year as a school administrator, and I have never felt such a high level of energy around transforming education. We had to cope through the pandemic. We had to adjust all these different practices. And I feel from teachers, from parents, from the kids: We're not going back to the way that things used to be. They have gained so much independence about what it means to be a learner. Some of the projects that kids have created while they were at home on remote learning have been incredible. We want to bring in more of that.

To return to a point that Brian made earlier, look at the work that we've been doing around racial equity. As a district, we've focused on naming the fact that from the founding of the United States, the way the educational system was set up created systemic racism and perpetuated injustices, first for Black students and then also for other students of color. It gives me a lot of hope that we're naming that.

Coleman: What gives me the most hope are examples of strong, intentional collaboration, where everyone is buying into a shared goal. Our district asked each school last spring whether we wanted to keep our school resource officers — police — or reallocate the money for those positions. Our school is working with a community organization that ideally would send therapists to schools a few days a week to see students we refer, at no cost to the student. The counseling we currently offer is short-term, so this would be a way to help students whose needs go beyond that.

Schwinn: We had a big bus tour this summer, and it was about celebrating schools. Our profession is a joyful profession. We have to bring that back.

We lifted up districts like Chattanooga, an urban district where there was growth across student groups, with high-dosage tutoring and personalized attention and lots of accommodations to families. We lifted up our rural communities, where we saw energized teachers and really high student attendance in summer learning camps. Despite a pandemic school year, about 30 percent or so of our districts saw some level of growth in student proficiency.

Radesky: I appreciate the caring and committed approaches you've all presented. But I wonder about all the schools where funding isn't being allocated as wisely. The teachers are exhausted — and aren't given the freedom to lie down on their classroom floors when they need to! — and the burden of children with special educational needs and social-emotional challenges is high.

I hope we keep encouraging kids to talk about how their bodies and brains feel. And I hope that based on the products we've seen and worked with for remote learning, we advocate for more child-centered designs for tech products, instead of platforms like YouTube and Tik Tok that monetize the attention of kids.

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Levinson: I appreciate everybody's desire to end on an upbeat note. I'm pleased by the public's recognition of all the things school districts do beyond academics. They've seen the importance of schools feeding kids, connecting them with mental-health services and providing medical care and therapy to address disabilities. Schools are the main venue in the United States for social-welfare support for kids.

At the same time, I do want to say, I'm really concerned. Will we look back in five or 10 years and say: "Whoa, schools got $190 billion. Where did that all go? We don't see the long-term payoff, so it must not be worth spending on schools."

I think what people don't get is that we spend $750 billion a year on K-12 education in the United States. When kids lost almost a third of the instructional days in the first year of the pandemic, crudely speaking, they lost out on $250 billion worth of education. The additional federal dollars haven't even made up that loss, let alone gone beyond it to address children's additional needs and trauma.

But I don't think we've framed it that way or factored that into our expectations for schools for what this "extra" federal money can accomplish.

I worry that five or 10 years down the line, some kids and young adults will still really be struggling to find their place. There's a risk that we'll look back at these pandemic years and say, "Oh, well, that was then." When in fact some of today's kids will feel the effects for decades.

I really hope that we can make a long-term commitment to these young people and say: "OK, you got off-track with your schooling then because you felt totally disconnected from your teachers, or you spiraled into depression, or you needed to work, but that's OK, because we're here for you now with opportunities. We have Covid scholarships for you to go to college, apprenticeships, paid internships, summer courses — all sorts of on-ramps back into learning." We need long-term, sustained investments to make up for what we've asked kids to sacrifice.

This discussion has been edited and condensed for clarity, with material added from follow-up interviews.

Emily Bazelon is a staff writer for the magazine and the Truman Capote fellow for creative writing and law at Yale Law School. Her 2019 book, "Charged," won the Los Angeles Times Book Prize in the current-interest category. **Erin Jang** is a graphic designer and an illustrator based in New York. She is the author of "How Are You Feeling?" and "You, Me, We!: Two Books for Parents and Kids to Fill in Together." **Jamie Chung** is a photographer based in New York.

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