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Can Parents Change a School?

Start by asking, 'What do they read here?'



NE OF THE more powerful, if unexpected, legacies of the Covid pandemic began with the startling view it gave us into our children's schools. As Zoom school dragged on—and *on*—and our exasperation mounted, we ended up receiving an infuriating gift: an extended close-up look at an educational system that was losing its way. There's no need to recount the staggering academic, social, and emotional costs of virtual schooling, from which some children may never recover. But it became clear that the failures often ran deeper than Zoom school. Loosening standards, sclerotic teaching methods, and administrations content to be on autopilot had seen academic performance take a yearslong dive.

Sure enough, after classrooms reopened, the problems hardly abated.

A raft of studies shows that educational achievement has been on the decline across America since the mid-2010s, including one released earlier this year by Stanford's Educational Opportunity Project, which suggested that the United States was in a decade-long "learning recession." The pandemic may have served as a wake-up call, but math and reading haven't come close to recovering. This summer, a viral article in *The Atlantic*, "The End of Reading Is Here," noted that school librarians were resorting to graphic novels to meet high schoolers at their reading level. Schools award diplomas, only for graduates to arrive at college unable to read 20-page articles, let alone books.

For many of us, it has never been clearer just how thoroughly a school can stand in the way of a good education. As we've found our voices, we've run up against administrators, school boards, and state officials who can be hard to budge. Undaunted parents have entered school board races, while others have turned to homeschooling, left for different schools, or started their own. Parents'-rights groups come in different flavors, and news coverage of them has, perhaps unfairly, produced an endless stream of headlines and short-form video of fiery school board clashes. They have successfully highlighted the indoctrination of students into trans ideology and successfully brought legal action to end policies that allow schools to keep parents in the dark about their children's "identity" issues. Since October 7, shocking political displays in the classroom and a rash of K-12 antisemitism scandals have added another angle to this fight for Jewish parents.

Still, for most moms and dads, the demands are simple: They want to make sure their kids are reading books and learning math and that they aren't targeted by antisemitism. They don't want to get swept away in overheated culture wars or be harassed in political battles. What are the levers they can pull as they engage with schools? Which ones tend to work, and which don't?



For starters, the fundamentals never change. Another major lesson of Covid-era schooling was that education happens at home as much as it does at school, on or off Zoom. A 2019 meta-analysis of hundreds of studies found positive associations between parental involvement in schooling and their kids' academic performance, regardless of school quality. Raising kids in an environment where books are read, multiplication tables are memorized, and screens aren't worshipped is foundational.

When engaging with a school, start at the beginning, asking questions and setting expectations before a new school year begins. In my experience, the most valuable question to ask is “What do they read here?” Yes, you should care about the people, materials, and methods a school employs to teach math and science — heaven knows there is some awful pedagogy out there — but the failures of these programs will become evident quickly. If your fifth-grader can't do basic multiplication, you will find out soon enough. But the reading list, at different stages of development, is where the value system, worldview, and habits of mind will be imparted. And you might be surprised how difficult it can be to get a straight answer to this fundamental question.

When my kids were getting started at our local public middle school, the administration gave me examples of books that had been read in the past, but they were reluctant to name any books slated to be read that year. They seemed to want to give teachers the flexibility to decide from one year to the next what was “relevant” or how much the kids could accomplish. On the occasion that a list was announced at the beginning of the year, teachers rarely got through it. Every year, the standards seemed to drop. During the pandemic, my seventh-grader at a top-rated public school read *The Hunger Games* and Dr. Seuss's *The*

Sneetches. When I asked why it took three months for the eighth-graders to read *Animal Farm*, the principal informed me, “I don’t know if you’re aware, but there are a lot of metaphors in this book.”

I wish I could say it was easier when my kids were at a Jewish elementary school, but I encountered the same obstacles to getting a straight answer about the reading syllabus. It astonished me that even veteran educators chafed at the question and couldn’t simply give an account of what they planned to read that year. Letting teachers decide what books will be read and how much will be covered in any given year is a recipe not only for classes that stray from a school’s mission but also for frustration with the school generally. Why were some kids in fourth grade learning more than others? How can fifth-grade teachers prepare when the fourth-grade curriculum is always in flux? Why have schools given up on not only books but also textbooks? How can parents assist with a homework question when they have no reference for what kids learned in class? Why are teachers going home at night and looking up activities online that they can do with their classes?

A lone parent doesn’t have a great deal of pull in setting curriculum standards, nor should she. But if the problem in a given school or district is big enough, a critical mass of engaged parents can initiate change. With coordination, an administration will be forced to care, and you’ll have a good shot at pressuring it to commit to a reading list that parents are comfortable with. A competent principal or assistant principal should be expected to hold teachers’ feet to the fire and tell them what every fourth-grader should be able to do.

When a parent body is galvanized, it has several levels at which it can operate: the school, the school board, or the state. The higher you go, the more time, effort, and resources you’ll need. It can take years, and most parents aren’t interested in sticking around after their kids have already outgrown the battle at hand. But mean-

ingful progress is possible. In 2022, Buffalo parents, educators, and local organizations joined forces to form the Western New York Literacy Initiative. Just two years later, their persistence paid off: New York became the latest state to follow Mississippi (one of the only states to have seen rapid gains in reading ability since 2010) and pass a bill adopting the phonics-based “science of reading” approach.

Yet, according to a May 2026 report, more than 100 New York school districts still haven’t adopted the new policy, even though the legislation mandated a September 2025 deadline. An informed, energized community of parents in a district could make all the difference. Bootcamps and fellowships have cropped up across the country to train parents in how best to do this. Parents are often made to feel as if teaching is rocket science and that, unless they are experts, they have no business offering input on curriculum. Even school board members may feel as if they are only there to decide on school-construction projects or teacher contracts, not what students are learning. Perhaps these programs will give parents the confidence they need to get more involved.

At the same time, there are pitfalls. We’ve all seen the shouting matches at school board meetings or attempts to shame certain teachers or administrators in the media. These tactics can be counterproductive. Many of the problems in the education system can hardly be considered, at bottom, political. But the second they reach the media, they become political and you lose control of the agenda. For parents who aim to have genuine influence over the direction of a school, antagonistic relationships with school leadership will likely prove to be a liability and a hindrance rather than an asset. If being under an unforgiving microscope is the new reality, the social media panopticon might be driving potential teachers away from the profession or making talented instructors walk on eggshells. According to a 2022 University of Chicago

poll, nearly half of Americans said the stress of dealing with parents was too high to go into teaching.

That said, parent groups can be useful tools to build networks and share information. Many parents have found success, for instance through groups such as Wait Until 8th, which pushes back against phones in schools. Once parents gain a critical mass, they have been able to go to school leaders and ask them to respond to concerns about the effects of technology in the classroom. The goal is to build common cause with other parents and with the people educating your children. You don't want power over them. You want to partner with them.

Antisemitism is another matter. As recent events have proven, virality and the outside pressure it brings are sometimes your only recourse. *The Free Press's* Frannie Block reported that a classroom at Brooklyn's PS 261 displayed a map of the Middle East that erased Israel, part of an "Arab Culture Arts" program funded by Qatar Foundation International. She also highlighted how Brown University's Choices Program, which produced K–12 curricula, was infusing the classroom with pro-Palestinian bias. When parents are confronted with challenges like these, they should press for institutional neutrality, with groups such as the North American Values Institute producing sample policies that administrators or school boards can adopt.



When should you throw in the towel and look elsewhere? The costs of leaving can be high—both socially in terms of uprooting your child from his environment and financially, with private school tuition or the cost of moving from one town to the next. You will need to do an honest accounting of what went wrong with the previous

school to assess whether the new one will have a better chance of success. And if you don't think it will, you're left with the nuclear option: starting a new school.

Take it from someone who has spent a lot of time on the ground at new educational institutions (both K–12 and colleges): The first thing to remember is that children and parents come and go, but faculty are forever. Most will outlast the children they teach. (If they don't, you should be suspicious of the high turnover rates.) The initial crop of teaching staff is crucial, and settling for people who are not completely qualified or not aligned with the mission of your new school can be devastating and have a cascading effect.

The only way to be sure you get the faculty you want is transparency about the school's expectations of its teachers. The more school leaders tell educators up front about the school's specific expectations, the less likely conflicts will arise down the line. But it won't solve everything. A friend of mine who runs a charter school had to fire a teacher in the school's first year of operation. His school's mission seemed abundantly clear, but the employee seemed to be willfully ignoring it when he took the job. Transparency makes it easier to part ways with staff who have gone off the rails: "Look, we told you what was and wasn't acceptable."

One common mistake I see is founding a school based on what it opposes. In the current climate, it might be tempting to establish schools that are avowedly anti-woke, against gender ideology or intersectionality or "antiracism." But this amounts to being defined by your opponents, and it's not enough to sustain a school in the long run. Ideological trends shift, social movements fizzle out. What happens after you manage to beat your opponents back? Without a positive mission, success can paradoxically take the wind out of your sails or lead to mission drift.

There's an undeniable attraction to being a pioneer generation,

and it's worth applauding parents who take on what is often an arduous task. But I should also mention that there's a danger: You risk attracting people who will never be satisfied with a school that does not respond to every demand. Building new institutions that will last requires collaboration, not just righteous anger. For every parent who wants to burn it all down and start over, you need dozens more who can, to borrow a phrase, "love the one they're with." *

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