

New York's School Chaos Is Breaking Me

By Michelle Goldberg



Students' desks conform to social distancing requirements at a Brooklyn elementary school, although it is uncertain if New York City schools will open on Sept. 9 as scheduled. Pool photo by Jeenah Moon

I'm writing this column at 4 a.m., because I can't sleep, again.

In New York City, where I live, in-person school is supposed to start in just over two weeks. Officially, my kids' public elementary school has adopted one of those logistically demented hybrid schedules, in which students attend either Tuesday and Thursday or Wednesday and Friday, plus every other Monday. But parents haven't been told their days yet, and despite the insistence of Mayor Bill de Blasio, I'm increasingly unsure the school will open at all.

There is widespread opposition to the mayor's plan among principals, including the principal of my own kids' school. The city teachers union is talking about striking.

"It's extremely unlikely that schools will open on Sept. 9," my city councilman, Brad Lander, told me, though he said he thinks there's a slightly better-than-even chance that they'll open later this fall.

Until we actually know what's happening, it's impossible to make plans of any sort. I'm lucky enough to have some options, even if they are all terrible. I can move to the coronavirus hot spot where my retired parents live and get their help. I can go into debt to get my kids into learning pods, if I can find openings.

Yet when I lie in bed struggling to figure out how to balance physical risk, economic sustainability and emotional well-being, I can't make the equation work. And if I can't do it, I'm not sure how parents with far fewer resources are doing it either.

A friend who works in chronically underfunded city high schools pointed out that privileged parents like me are getting a taste of something that other urban parents have always gone through. No matter what I do — no matter how much futile energy I spend trying to think my way out of this — an adequate public education is now out of reach for my family, and I'm not quite sure how to secure a private one. I'm one of many relatively rich people experiencing what poor people experience all the time — total abandonment by our government.

The abandonment starts, of course, at the top, with a president who has refused to take the necessary steps to get the pandemic under control. By blundering into the debate over schools, issuing threats and pressuring the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to change its guidelines, the administration has destroyed many people's confidence that schools can be reopened safely, even in places like New York City that have very low transmission rates.

Republican senators have abandoned families by refusing to pass new funding to allow schools to improve ventilation and make other urgently required upgrades. Gov. Andrew Cuomo has abandoned families by refusing to raise taxes on the wealthy even as state budget cuts could mean 9,000 teacher layoffs in the city. The state Legislature has failed families by refusing to let the city borrow money as a stopgap measure.

I nearly sobbed with relief when I learned, on Monday, that the mayor and schools chancellor had finally unveiled a plan for outdoor classrooms — because it's been so punishingly rare during this pandemic for anyone with authority to use it creatively on children's behalf. Yet, welcome as this plan is, it's impossible to understand why they made us wait all summer for it.

Recently I ran into an acquaintance, a psychotherapist named Lesley Alderman, who told me that among her patients, those with young children were generally struggling the most. "Parents with young kids, they're tearing their hair out," she told me. Many of them, she said, "want their kids desperately to go back to school, and then there's this kind of guilt: 'Am I selfish for wanting this? Am I putting my kids in jeopardy? Are we putting the teachers in jeopardy?'"

These aren't dilemmas that individuals should have to solve. "Why isn't the government, particularly here in New York City, helping the schools, funding the schools properly, so that the schools can be a safe place where their kids can go?" asks Alderman. Though parents are blaming themselves for not being able to make their lives work, she said, "Someone failed them."

Alderman works on a sliding scale, so her patients range from the middle class to the affluent. Because, in this environment, parents need a lot of money to have even a minimally tolerable quality of life, many whom she talks to feel both newly envious of others and ashamed of that envy. "They just feel like, all the sudden, what if I've done my kids wrong?" she says.

When safety and education are so profoundly privatized, when even the meager social supports America once offered to families simply disappear, panic and self-recrimination result. There are only two ways out of pandemic-driven insecurity: great personal wealth or a functioning government. Right now, many of us who'd thought we were insulated from American precarity are finding out just how frightening the world can be when you don't have either.