

Schools Attempt to Keep Children in the 'Magic Womb'

Many children are hitting the books again for another school year in a way they never have before. Still in a COVID coma, many schools have opted for a distance learning model, or a hybrid model combining in-person and distance instruction.

Yet even as we begin the new school year, reports are still emerging of how terrible the last one was, particularly for students whose home situation made it difficult for them to regularly check in to their classes. In Massachusetts, students who failed to attend online class regularly were even reported to the Department of Children and Families, the [*Boston Globe* reports](#):

Indeed, several cities took the state guidance very seriously. In a note outlining their responsibilities during the spring remote learning period, Worcester school officials reminded teachers of their roles as 'mandatory reporters' to DCF. That list of expectations included little about their role ensuring students continued their learning during the pandemic.

Such tattling did not go over well with parents. Families who receive a call or visit from child protective agencies often run the risk of having their child taken away from them. Parents were incensed that their families would be subjected to such threats, especially since some of those interviewed believed they had done their best to work with the schools, but had received little help in navigating their difficult situations. As the *Boston Globe* explains:

[T]he COVID-19 crisis and school closings have given schools new ways to surveil and punish parents, said Leon Smith, executive director of Citizens for Juvenile Justice. That's happening both through the close attention to online

absenteeism and video conferencing that allows teachers to see inside a family's home.

That should be unsettling to any person, parent or no. What we may not realize, however, is that such behavior is a natural outgrowth of compulsory education. In the realm of compulsory schooling, Ivan Illich notes in his book [*Deschooling Society*](#) that the teacher operates as "custodian, preacher, and therapist." As such, the teacher operates "*in loco parentis*" for "parents, God, or the state" and "feels authorized to delve into the personal life of his pupil in order to help him grow as a person."

Illich continues:

Classroom attendance removes children from the everyday world of Western culture and plunges them into an environment far more primitive, magical, and deadly serious. School could not create such an enclave within which the rules of ordinary reality are suspended, unless it physically incarcerated the young during many successive years on sacred territory. The attendance rule makes it possible for the schoolroom to serve as a magic womb, from which the child is delivered periodically at the school days and school year's completion until he is finally expelled into adult life. Neither universal extended childhood nor the smothering atmosphere of the classroom could exist without schools. Yet schools, as compulsory channels for learning, could exist without either and be more repressive and destructive than anything we have come to know.

Yet with the arrival of COVID, schools and teachers had a new experience. No longer were children required to show up to a physical classroom under the watchful eye of teachers. So teachers, small wonder, continued to respond as they would in a normal circumstance: trying to create the womb of the classroom even while children were at home, trying to maintain the authority of the school district, and trying to hold the

reins of control even while children were technically outside of their grasp.

To be fair, many teachers are well-meaning and genuinely care about their students. It grieves them to think that their students may be falling behind in these unique times. Yet we must remind ourselves that they are government employees, and not the students' parents who have the ultimate responsibility for the student's well-being.

As we head into another unique school year, we would do well to keep Illich's words in mind. Illich likely never thought it possible that an event would occur in which students were suddenly forced out of compulsory schooling, but if he did, I can't help but wonder if he'd rejoice in the idea that children now have an opportunity to shake free from school's shackles.

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