Private Instincts and Public Ideals

Private Instincts and Public Ideals:

Parents' Stories of Navigating P-12 Education

Edited by

Gregory J. Fritzberg

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Private Instincts and Public Ideals: Parents' Stories of Navigating P-12 Education

Edited by Gregory J. Fritzberg

This book first published 2025

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-0364-4089-3
ISBN (Ebook): 978-1-0364-4090-9

AN ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to publicly express gratitude to Kirsten Sundberg Lunstrum, who was both a graduate student of mine and at the same time a teaching colleague. If I hadn't encountered Kirsten in my final years of university teaching, I wouldn't have attempted to execute a book idea I had carried with me for over fifteen years. I am grateful for our earliest conversations about parenting and schooling and for her lovely essay that follows my introduction to the book. Kirsten's piece sets the tone for the passion and authenticity that happily characterize the collection as a whole.

A DEDICATION

I wish to dedicate this book to my dear brother, Jon Richard Fritzberg, who passed away about a year before its publication. Jon would have taken great joy in this accomplishment, true to the way he encouraged me my whole life. Rest in peace, Jon; I miss you deeply. We all shall see you again soon.

What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Anything less is unlovely, and left unchecked, destroys our democracy.

—John Dewey, *The School and Society* - 1899

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE

Private Instincts and Public Ideals: Parents' Stories of Navigating P-12 Education brings together thirteen parents (or guardians; couples and singles) reflecting as honestly as they can on how they guided their children's pre-collegiate schooling.

All parents instinctively desire that their children flourish educationally and socially, while some simultaneously consider public ideals of equality of opportunity and democratic formation in their choices about school and program enrollment. The dynamic interplay of these private, parental *instincts* and public, democratic *ideals* is the thematic focus of this book. Each of the essayists will self-interrogate the values that guided their educational choice-making with respect to these distinct but not necessarily conflicting motivations.

Given the emphasis on parents' values—inherently personal and subjective—over advancing any version of the "*right* ideals," this collection of reflective stories will raise more questions than it answers. Non-judgmental narratives about parents' school journeys simply till the soil for more nuanced discussions of school quality and accessibility in a society as unequal and ideologically divided as our United States. The thoughtfulness and transparency displayed by these "citizen-parents" are potent models for readers' own reflections and engagement in various schooling contexts.

Readers ought to and certainly will approach the book with different interests. For the many readers for whom reflective narrative is more engaging than historical and philosophical analysis, chapters two through fourteen provide stories that address the common themes articulated above but are also so unique to the authors that they can stand alone as vehicles for reflection and learning. So, readers, start anywhere you wish, and address the conceptual material in the introductory and concluding chapters if and when you feel ready.

Finally, an editorial note: The contributions to this anthology differ significantly in writing style, and this is intentional. The current or former professors within this collection write more "academically" than those who are used to writing popular press essays. Additionally, some parent contributors are not professional writers in either sense and write with varied stylistic patterns. I have attempted to preserve the unique voice and

communication style of each contributor, hopefully adding authenticity, variety, and vitality to the collection.

Greg Fritzberg
Seattle, Washington
February, 2025

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: PARENTAL REFLECTIONS ON PRIVATE INSTINCTS AND PUBLIC IDEALS

GREGORY J. FRITZBERG

Gregory J. Fritzberg was a youth minister and public school teacher prior to earning a Ph.D. in educational philosophy and serving almost thirty years as a professor of education. For many of these years as a professor, Greg ran funded programs providing university-educated tutors for Seattle Public Schools. He is the author of the book, *In the Shadow of "Excellence": Recovering a Vision of Educational Opportunity for All*, and many scholarly articles and popular press essays. Greg and his wife Marie have raised, educated, and advocated for their two now-grown children, who both attended local public elementary and middle schools before their paths diverged. Their daughter graduated from a Catholic all-girls high school, and their son attended his neighborhood public high school. Both children graduated from public universities in Washington state.

School Stories: National, Local, and Personal

I grew up on school stories, my father being a junior high school principal in the 1960s and 1970s. Like father, like son? Affirmative. Having spent a career in education myself, I can now share a few stories of my own. I'll start big and then make them more personal.

In 2007, the United States Supreme Court passed judgment on enrollment policies in Seattle Public Schools, arising from a lawsuit filed by parents in my own neighborhood and about the neighborhood high school my children would attend. Ballard High School had just been remodeled, and as often happens, brand new environs led to an application surplus at a previously unremarkable high school, requiring the use of a district tie-breaker formula reflecting the urban district's effort to make the

racial composition of each school reflective of the overall district. In other words, no racially isolated schools.[1] Affluent parents in my neighborhood of Magnolia, about two miles as a crow flies from Ballard High, were displeased that living near the high school only marginally enhanced the odds of their children getting into it. Residential proximity mattered less than whether or not a child's racial identity contributed to the school's racial balance, and these parents wanted that reversed.

Organized as *Parents Involved in Community Schools,* some Magnolia families filed a class-action lawsuit against the district's enrollment policy, and since Seattle's desegregation controversies reflected difficulties in many cities, our nation's highest court eventually took the case (in tandem with a case from Louisville, Kentucky). The United States Supreme Court's 5-4 decision regarding enrollment protocol at Ballard High School—allowing neighborhood residence to trump racial balance—was defended by Justice Clarence Thomas in pointed reference to the central role of race in the historic *Brown vs. Board of Education* (of Topeka, Kansas) desegregation ruling, one of America's best known civil rights cases: "What was wrong in 1954 cannot be right today."[2] Thomas conflated forced racial segregation in our Jim Crow past with much more recent race-informed efforts to desegregate schools, an error his peer Justice John Paul Stevens called "a cruel irony."[3] This irony was enhanced by the fact that Thomas' only black predecessor on the high court, Thurgood Marshall, had led the NAACP's successful litigation of *Brown* before later being appointed by President Lyndon Johnson to the Supreme Court.

The Ballard High School that my son later attended differed significantly from its 2007 version, as one would expect; it was far whiter because the area it served was predominantly white, and by then fewer kids came to the school from other neighborhoods in the district. Although segregation is morally problematic, the victorious 2007 Magnolia plaintiffs had some truths on their side. "Neighborhood schools," where parental investment is more convenient, resonate with many people, as does avoiding the time and carbon costs of busing kids farther than necessary. (Placing the burden of racial desegregation on kids in schools while adults live apart is

[1] In the early 1970s, Seattle became America's first city to voluntarily desegregate without court order, and this tie-breaker policy reflected its progressive legacy. Unfortunately, in a city characterized by residential segregation tied to both historic racial divisions and income inequality, school desegregation necessitated the almost universally unpleasant practice of busing children all over the city.

[2] "Parsing the High Court's Ruling on Race and Schools," NPR, June 28, 2007, https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=11507539.

[3] Ibid.

likewise "convenient," but less defensibly so.) Moreover, desegregating schools by the less politicized variable of income level, which *somewhat* correlates with race—as recently practiced in Cambridge, Massachusetts—seems more promising. Anyway, all education policy decisions are fraught with difficulty and decisions must be made. As parents who simultaneously aspire to be good citizens—"citizen-parents" if you will—we must stay educated about school policy dilemmas related to equity and diversity and express our convictions. The concerns of particular parents, no matter how well-intended, obviously cannot dictate attendance policies in national, state, or even local education contexts. However, it's different when we're talking closer to home, about our *own* choices around the education of our own children, and that's what we want to explore here.

The challenge of making complex and impactful parental choices around education is especially poignant in my case. As an education professor at a liberal arts university, I had the luxury of opining about school policy decisions that I was not facilitating or even contributing to if they were out of my sphere of influence. But there's no such margin of safety as a parent. Like all parents and guardians, my wife and I are fully responsible for the choices we made about our kids' education (I chose the past tense in our case as both our children have graduated from college). My task in this introductory chapter is to present the context for the narrative essays that follow, so I'll be brief with our family narrative, which relates to the Ballard High School story in a couple more personal ways. First, while we lived in the Magnolia neighborhood in 2007, our children were already commuting to a public elementary school in nearby Ballard. Both our kids tested into what one could call "tier two" advanced learning opportunities, below the highest category of "gifted" but eligible for specific ability-based programs. One Ballard elementary school offered a five-year cohort opportunity with similarly identified learners, and we were so attracted to the idea of longer-term elementary relationships that we drove our kids to this school each morning and afternoon from first through fifth grade since no bus served our neighborhood. Second, it's worth mentioning that our son attended and graduated from Ballard High School, but our daughter never did. She went to Ballard's nearest feeder middle school, but we later supported her desire to go to an all-girls Catholic High School, which she dearly loved. Our son didn't love high school, though he would be the first to admit that it wasn't about Ballard High specifically, but rather his lack of enthusiasm for academics in general at that time. This, of course, matches a

broader *tendency* for girls to like school more than boys.[4] For our son, soccer, surfing, and skateboarding were much more fun.

How do these family scenarios relate to issues of equity—equal opportunity—in schooling, if at all? Or, do they relate in any way to our collective aspirations for democracy, to children learning in diverse settings, and to building cross-cultural citizenship skills for their complex futures? Can one family's choices for segments of their children's P-12 education impact others enough to present real-world trade-offs and dilemmas in terms of these larger ideals? There are certainly parents who answer in the negative and who feel very little tension between individual family advocacy and broader social ideals, but I lament this reality and hope our essays disrupt such comfort. The narrative essays that follow will illustrate the trade-offs and dilemmas more thoroughly than I'll do here because my purpose is different, but let me briefly connect my own parenting choices described above to lofty notions like equality of opportunity and democratic education.

Starting with the choice my wife and I made to put both our children in a self-contained five-year elementary program upon their becoming eligible, we should ask how their move affected children in the other two classrooms of each grade, one through five. Did advanced learning designation for one of the three classes (all about thirty students) introduce an element of comparison that hampered student confidence and triggered resentment in the other two classes or—worse yet—smugness among the so-called "Spectrum" students? Were interactions on the playground or in school assemblies toxically shaped by perceived differences of status? We felt that the Spectrum designation was understated our whole time there, but were we rendered oblivious by advantage? If we were simply unaware, were the benefits we sought of relational continuity across five grades sufficient to justify any of these negative dynamics? How would we ever know? The choice we made was clearly for our own children's benefit (or so we hoped), and its drawbacks were either more diffuse or mainly impacting sixty kids we would never know as well as we might have in a school with no such program.

Three years later (after middle school), did my daughter's attendance at Holy Names Academy—and her *absence* at Ballard High School—cause a public school to lose a committed set of parents? Were we likewise distracted from public school advocacy in general, a serious question in a city that ranks among the very top in families opting out of public

[4] Recent research shows that girls, as a group, achieve higher grades while taking harder classes, even now in traditionally male-dominated fields like mathematics and science.

schooling? Following years of "white flight" in the 1960s and 1970s, this preference for privatized schooling caused the Seattle Public Schools to lose a stunning one-half of its student body by the time our daughter entered high school (student enrollment has since recovered moderately). Since money follows students in the form of per-pupil funding, the district's challenges have been steep, and there's no doubt that while we routinely supported levies, we were less attentive to other forms of fundraising.

So, how defensible were our schooling choices for our children, on balance? If our elementary advanced learning and private high school enrollment decisions were individually motivated but with some communal awareness, might other parents have been more noble? Likely some, but this binary analysis falls short. Parental schooling decisions rarely align perfectly with either an individual (my child) or a communal (best for the community) emphasis. Additionally, idealistic readers might rightly declare private instincts versus public ideals a false dichotomy to begin with. For some parents, what benefits a community, by definition, benefits individual children in ways that trump a more individualistic posture.

I'll just let the questions sit in our case, while the essayists who follow me here probe more deeply. My task below is to provide some historical and theoretical context for their explorations. In the concluding chapter, I explore how public school choice—an emerging arena of educational policymaking—might connect to this narrative collection. This policy discussion follows the essays because I don't wish controversial political applications to stand in the way of readers' engagement in the stories. Indeed, it's optional reading, but I hope some of you find it worthwhile.

The Public and Private Purposes of Schooling

Education scholars have long lamented what they see as an ongoing shift in our popular understanding of *why* it is that American children attend schools. Historically, the purposes of education were framed in very public, democratic terms. "I know no safe depositary of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves," Thomas Jefferson famously observed. "And if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education."[5] Jefferson ultimately failed in his bid for tax-supported education in Virginia, which emerged victorious yet financially broke after the Revolutionary War, but

[5] "Thomas Jefferson to William Charles Jarvis, 28 September 1820," Manuscript/Mixed Material. https://www.loc.gov/item/mtjbib023901/.

he laid the rhetorical groundwork for Horace Mann's mid-nineteenth century campaign for common schools in Massachusetts and elsewhere. Our first statewide public school systems were termed "common" because they served both socio-economically middle-class and disadvantaged families, and communities began to share teachers, curriculum, and facility standards under emerging state leadership. These democratic convictions and practices formed the bedrock of the origins and progressive growth of American schooling, a quintessentially public endeavor.

Times have changed. From a political and institutional perspective, the fundamental rationale for public schooling has morphed from literacy and citizenship to the creation of a competitive workforce to compete in a global economy. A Reagan-era report called *A Nation at Risk* epitomized this approach to education. The national assets "at risk" mentioned in the report, and echoed in a spate of similar documents that followed, were "our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation."[6] Related to this increasingly economically-driven (versus democratically-driven) approach to education policy-making, the perspective of students and families themselves—the "clients" of American schooling—changed as well. Here also, an increasingly private orientation toward education emerged and strengthened. In 1979, sociologist Randall Collins argued in *The Credential Society* that what students learned in school was less important than earning a diploma or degree. Moreover, from *where* the degree comes is crucial; the Ivy League trumps "good old State U." This stratification of university selectivity and consequent occupational advantages makes P-12 preparation, from course selection to SAT scores, a high stakes affair for ambitious families. In this shifting context, reminding Americans, be they policymakers or parents, of our original, democratic rationale for education is absolutely critical.

Naming and Defining America's Public Ideals

I've mentioned equal opportunity and education for democracy above, but I think the tripartite motto of the French Revolution—translated here as liberty, equality, and fraternity—offers a more complete expression of the social and political ideals we share in the United States. These ideals, informing America's *public* purposes of education, can operate as side-constraints that healthily temper over-emphasis on the *private* purposes of education—schooling in the service of mere credentials, such as status-conferring degrees and consequent income and wealth. The ideal of *liberty*

[6] "A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform," National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983.

corresponds well with the unique way Americans understand *equality*, the two ideals rather smoothly coalescing into equality of opportunity. Equal opportunity, in turn—and its schooling-centered derivative equal educational opportunity—is often defined as approximate parity of "life chances" across all persons and social groups pursuing what we have called the "American dream."

Now, the dominant conceptual stature of equality of opportunity in America, however, is oddly paired with our failure to recognize what it would actually entail to authentically equalize life chances. The *absence* of barriers to success is not the same thing as the *presence* of supporting institutions for all children, such as healthcare, housing, and yes, schooling. Education provisions such as quality facilities and curriculum—and salaries that support high-quality teachers—vary profoundly according to the resources of communities and thus affect some parents more than others. Families in under-resourced communities seek to make any beneficial changes they can out of perceived necessity, diligently weighing public school programs and teachers in their neighborhoods, or perhaps "going private" or moving to a wealthier district if personal finances permit. More advantaged families have better public options to begin with but still understandably seek out what's "best" for their children. In either case, the choices of education-attentive parents impact the school and classroom communities they *leave* as much as those they *join*. The myriad, multivalent impacts of our personal choices are rarely obvious, but we recognize that our educational choices are connected to others. The dynamics of schooling realities and our choices are fluid and mutually influential.

Fraternity is the third ideal—alongside liberty and equality—championed in the French Revolution (which sanctioned a "reign of terror," in tragic irony), and the importance of this ideal cannot be overstated because it is the essential lubricant of our democratic polity. The symbolic quotation of this whole book project, expressed by the American philosopher John Dewey in *The School and Society* (1899), best captures this reality in the realm of education: "What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Anything less is unlovely, and left unchecked, destroys our democracy."[7] Dewey understood that democracy and citizenship are about far more than periodic voting and knowing "how a bill becomes a law." Democracy requires healthy relationships among citizens, even and especially when they have divergent experiences and opinions. It really isn't surprising that while Dewey was a wide-ranging philosopher and a leading advocate of American "pragmatism," his institutional topic of interest was schooling.

[7] John Dewey, *The School and Society* (University of Chicago Press, 1899), 19.

American public schools are and have always been the central training grounds for democratic citizenship, reaching beyond academic learning through the social relationships young people develop in schools—their actual experience of fraternity. Fraternity—a sense of community and mutual obligation—is arguably the most salient variable determining the future of America's democratic experiment.

But a brief caveat about fraternity is important before proceeding. An assumption of almost all writing about public versus private schooling—and this book is no exception—grants public education the *fraternity advantage* by default. It's beyond the scope of this chapter to interrogate this assumption thoroughly, but I hope it's understood that private schools are not inherently anti-democratic. The idea of the American "melting pot" is misleading if too bluntly applied; America is a vast collection of smaller communities, and these communities vary widely in their awareness and energy for recognizing and cooperating with others. Children *can* be educated in private contexts that raise up attitudes of respect for all social groups. Isolationist tendencies do not *necessarily* result from private school populations determined by pedagogical choice or even religious ideology. Yes, a critical element to consider is actual contact between children of various social groups, and public schools excel here even while private schools seek to diversify enrollment. I merely wish to insert caution into the categorical assumption that the motivations and outcomes of private schooling automatically run counter to high democratic aspirations.

Continuing the Dance of E Pluribus Unum: "The One and the Many"

Having hopefully demonstrated above the significant public purposes of schooling, we cannot then just ignore the private aspirations of families. Parents, no matter their cultural identity, generally share a desire for the emotional health, social contentment, civic connectedness, and intellectual growth of their children and passionately seek to support and even maximize their academic pathways. Parents want to know what will happen in their child's classroom and if their child will thrive. They want to know what kinds of kids their children will be with. (This last concern can sometimes have unfortunate class-based or racial subtexts, though usually unspoken.) As noted above, parents today worry about the same things education reformers have always worried about—facilities, curriculum, teacher quality, class size, and the way standardized testing narrows instruction. Parents, however, unlike even the most empathic reformers, carry these concerns viscerally as their beloved children are "on the line"

with each educational choice they make. Indeed, the incomparably deep, visceral nature of parents' concern for their children's well-being and education is properly described as *instinctual*. A precise definition of parental instinct is beyond my purview here, but few would argue that when we speak of parents' attention to their children's opportunities for development in operational terms, characterizing it as an instinct captures the almost involuntary power of our love for our offspring.

Integrating Private Instincts and Public Ideals: Introducing a Set of Parental Narratives

The instinctive depth of parents' investment in their children is clearly manifest in the set of narrative essays that comprise the bulk of this book, indeed its reason for being. A diverse group of parents will tell their stories about navigating the schooling experience alongside their children. *How* the various contributors' stories and reflections integrate their parental commitment to their children's well-being and the lofty ideals of equal opportunity and community will vary author to author. Readers' experience of the contributors' reflections as they process these essays—feelings of empathy, admiration, or disagreement, perhaps all in one essay (!)—will be similarly divergent. I want to communicate emphatically that simple honesty is the primary objective of these essays, more than testaments to any writer's moral heroism or turpitude. Besides honesty, I also aim for practicality in what follows. The discussion of ideas can be perceived as relevant or self-indulgent depending on how well it is carried out, but I adopt here the more "earthy" lens of *values* as opposed to morality or ethics. In my view, discussing our deepest values with candor is never impractical. Our values are personal by definition; they pervade every thought we communicate or action we take, and it can serve our collective interests to surface them in nonjudgmental contexts.

Championing this curious, respectful, and nonjudgmental lens of *values*, I am proud to present the following collection of thirteen narrative essays from a broad range of contributors who share two things in common while expressing that commonality in myriad ways: An instinctual love of their children[8] and a principled care and responsibility for their communities—local, state, and national. I invite you to immerse yourself in their stories.

[8] I do not intend to minimize in any way the spontaneity and joy of parental love, nor to trigger debate on its instinctual source. Healthy parental love surely *functions* instinctually—we all can agree—regardless of its source.

CHAPTER TWO

THE LONG, HARD ROAD: LEARNING TO NAVIGATE MY CHILDREN'S EDUCATION

KIRSTEN SUNDBERG LUNSTRUM

Kirsten Sundberg Lunstrum is the author of the novel *Elita* (TriQuarterly/Northwestern University Press, winter 2025) and three collections of fiction: *What We Do with the Wreckage* (which won the 2017 Flannery O'Connor Award in Short Fiction and was published by UGA Press in 2018), *Swimming with Strangers* (Chronicle, 2008), and *This Life She's Chosen* (which was a Barnes & Noble Discover title and was published by Chronicle in 2005). Her fiction has been awarded a PEN/O. Henry Prize and has been published in *Ploughshares, McSweeney's Quarterly Concern, North American Review, The American Scholar,* and elsewhere. Kirsten has taught creative writing, composition, and literature for over two decades at secondary and post-secondary schools across the U.S. She currently teaches middle school English at an independent K-12 school and lives with her family near Seattle.

I.

Let me offer you a scene: It's the spring of 2015. This particular afternoon is one of the first truly warm and bright days of the season in my cloudy corner of the country, and the cherry blossoms are just opening on the trees that line my block. I could almost be hopeful about the long winter we've had—the slog, really—coming to a close. When the school bus gusts to a stop and the doors wheeze open, I see my boy, my eight-year-old, slump stern-faced down the steps, and whatever uplift I felt deflates.

As soon as we are safely in the car, he begins crying. "What's wrong?" I ask. I hope he doesn't hear the weariness in my voice. I am empathetic, but I'm also frustrated.

He's been in trouble. Again.

"Why?" I ask.

He shrugs and hangs his freckled face so that he doesn't have to meet my eyes.

Since he was little, my son has often been described as "busy," which is what people say when they are polite but want to let you know that your child is too much—too much noise, too much movement, too many questions. Is it appropriate for a mother to say that her love for her child and her fatigue in mothering him are equal in measure? Because that is what I feel in this moment.

This year, his teacher is a military veteran with what seems to be very low tolerance for busy children. My son has lost a good number of his recesses because he has dallied on his way to his desk in the morning, fidgeted with his nametag or his pencil—or with his neighbor's nametag or pencil. He has been reprimanded for interrupting classroom readings with too many questions, for doodling on the edges of his math worksheets, for simply standing up in the middle of quiet work time to circumnavigate the room. On a recent night, he sat in his bed in the low glow of his star-projecting nightlight and sobbed until his body shook. When I held him, he wiped his eyes and said, "Mama, I don't want to be such a bad kid. I don't mean to be such a bad kid."

Now, however, he simply asks, "What's my consequence?"

I don't have the heart to follow through on our household "trouble at school, trouble at home" policy anymore though. This year has broken me. I tell him we'll talk about it later, and we drive home in exhausted silence.

This is my son's third year in the public school system. Tonight, after the kids have been put to bed, my husband and I decide that it will be his last.

II.

Let me say this to you so that you understand my choices as a parent: my love for my children is fierce and boundless. Any mother would say as much about her babies, I know. This love can make me expansive, but it can also narrow my vision. This love has made me soft with compassion at times, and at others, it has sharpened me like a blade. *What do I want for my children?* I have been asked and have asked myself on countless sleepless nights over the years of my parenthood. My love for them has always dictated the answer.

"Childhood," writes Rousseau in his *Emile, or On Education*, "has its own way of seeing, thinking, and feeling, and nothing is more foolish than to try to substitute ours for theirs."

My wish for my children on that night back in 2015—the night my husband and I decided to withdraw our son from public school—was that the world beyond my household would receive them with tenderness, with care. That it would be for them, as teeming with possibility as they themselves were. That it would be riotous with wonders that would fill them with questions. That it would not squash in them the innate childhood instinct to see, think, and feel—to be curious and exploratory and creative. That it would not kill their inborn love of learning.

Until I sent him to school, these wishes for my son were not unmet.

The decision to find an alternative educational route for my children, however, marked a drastic turn in my family's approach to fulfilling those wishes, and it strained our longstanding allegiances.

Here's a complication to my story: I am an educator. I have spent my two-decades-long career teaching English literature and writing to students ranging in level from middle school through graduate school. My mother is a retired professor of nursing. My sister is the head of school at a private P-12 near Seattle. Among my extended family are a public special education teacher, two public high school math teachers, and a handful of secondary athletics coaches. My grandmother worked as a paraeducator in the public school system for the last decade of her professional life, and my grandfather spent his seventies driving a public school bus. My husband's grandmother—who was like a grandmother to me, as well—was a public school art teacher, and my mother-in-law is a special education "para" in her public school district.

This is to say, I have spent my life surrounded by educators who deeply believe in and vocally advocate for—both around our dinner tables and in public spheres—the absolute and inherent necessity of accessible education for all children in a functional democratic nation. I was raised to understand that it was both our democratic right to participate in such an educational system and our privilege to sustain that system for all American kids. I'm not overstating it to say that in my family, learning is holy work and schools are sacred places.

It's for this reason that when my husband and I made the choice to pull our son from public school in spring of 2015, at the end of his second-grade year, it was difficult for me to reconcile that choice with my history, my identity, and my beliefs. Nevertheless, out of what I would now call parental desperation, we went ahead and put our money and our time and our hope into private education.

But let me back up.

When my son entered kindergarten (in the fall of 2012, for the sake of the timeline here), we (my husband and I, my parents and sister and in-laws) were all excited and happy for him. Being a family of teachers, it was a big deal to send the first child (the first grandchild on both sides) to school. His milestone moment had come: He was a student! In truth, though, we also had talked at length about school as a place where he—that busy, curious, endlessly interested kid—would find belonging and joy. The kid had come into the world a natural learner (as, I believe, do all kids). He had always been quick, social, and generally genial—a boy who (and, again, I'd argue that, given the right circumstances, this is true of all kids) inherently enjoyed the process of learning something new.

When we sent him to kindergarten at six (he has an August birthday), this affinity for learning, coupled with his birth into a family of educators, meant that he was already reading proficiently, already counting to 500, and already cognizant of the social basics of community (like taking turns and getting into a line and sharing). That first day of school he came home with a letter from the teacher explaining the curricular goals for the year, and I noted that he had already met every one of them.

No big deal, I told myself. There's always more to learn. And school is great! He'll make friends!

That is not, however, what happened. Or at least, not all of what happened. He did make friends. And when I am in a generous state of mind, I can admit that he did also learn, though the lesson was that when you are part of a large system without much ability to accommodate deviation from the norm, your central job is to mold yourself to fit. This isn't a valueless lesson—certainly not. Molding oneself to fit the norm is, in fact, much of the work of adulthood. And yet, watching my child fail to fit, take on the shame of such failure, and then resist the system altogether—that was painful.

What happened was that, in his boredom, my son became a class troublemaker. He finished his work early and was sent to read silently in a common area outside of his classroom and his teacher's gaze, where—alone and unsupervised—he instead played. He was told to help his classmates with their work and instead engaged them in conversation that his teacher deemed "off task." He lost recess and free-reading time as a consequence for his misbehavior. He was often given a "yellow card"—his teacher's code for "warning." He began to think of himself as a "bad kid," a phrase he used freely in self-describing his identity.

Early on—in the winter of his kindergarten year—I suggested at a parent-teacher conference that perhaps his teacher could write the required

recommendation to have him tested for the district's gifted program, which might give him a chance to have more challenging work. She declined. She didn't think he'd pass. His rambunctious behaviors didn't align with giftedness, she told me.

She was wrong, of course. School district tests for giftedness are, I knew, less about a child's innate cognitive abilities and more about a child's ability to demonstrate the skills and knowledge that led my son to be overprepared for kindergarten: literacy, numeric memory, and practice answering puzzle-based questions of the sort we often played with at home for fun.

I filed a parental waiver of the recommendation, had him tested anyway, and he passed with phenomenal scores. The next year, as a first grader, he enrolled in the district's gifted program, which meant moving his attendance to an elementary school across town from our home. Our school district isolates the gifted program, K-5, into a single building. Attending the program means a lengthy bus ride for most kids or a parent free to commute with them. It means separation from neighborhood friends. And it means taking the first step away from the truly democratic ideal of a "common school" for all (and participating in a tool historically used to maintain school segregation[1]). I was willing to take on all of that if it gave my kid an opportunity to feel less terrible about himself and to rediscover his joy in learning.

That isn't what happened, though. What we found was that, in our case, gifted education did not mean more progressive pedagogy or teaching practice or acceptance of the exceptionalities that often accompany neurodivergence. It meant being in a classroom that engaged the same rote and repetitive academic work but at an accelerated pace. Unlike our neighborhood school, the gifted program also seemed to encourage from its teachers a lower tolerance for asynchronous development in a child. The unspoken expectation was that if your child's academic ability was two or three grade levels beyond his age, his emotional and physical abilities should also be mature. (This kind of synchronicity in human development is rare, though, and—generally speaking—kids who are academically precocious are not also emotionally, physically, or socially advanced for their age.) We hung on for quite a while, thinking the program would get

[1] At the time I enrolled my son in our district's gifted program, I was ignorant of this history, but there is well-documented use of gifted programs to support racial segregation in schools after such segregation became illegal following *Brown vs. the Board of Education* in 1954. Chana Joffe-Walt's 2020 podcast *Nice White Parents* is a beautifully accessible source of information on this and can be found at https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/23/podcasts/nice-white-parents-serial.html.

better, but by the winter of my son's second-grade year it was clear that the "gifted" program wasn't working for us, nor for many of the other kids who had enrolled in my son's cohort. There was growing frustration among the parents, and as we gathered in the school parking lot to wait for our kids at the end of each school day, we often talked about alternatives. Where else could we go? One family declared the intention to homeschool the following year. Another said they planned to return to their neighborhood public school, this time with an IEP (Individualized Education Program) that they hoped would give their child more accommodations for the many facets of his neurodivergence. Another was going private.

This led, eventually, to that night in 2015, when it became clear to my husband and me (the recognition as heavy as a stone sinking through water) that like the other families, we needed a change for our second grader. We began actively looking for a school outside of the public system.

III.

Let me assure you that in writing this, even in 2023, eight years after that moment of panicked parental decision-making, I feel real despair. (Remember: I'm an educator.) I'm not unaware of the marvel that is American public education. In a nation as geographically and demographically vast as the U.S., the creation and sustained basic functioning of a common and accessible education system that serves nearly all our children is an enormous feat. And according to Gallup[2] polls, the overwhelming majority of parents report being satisfied with their public schools. And why shouldn't they be? Public education serves *most* of our children *mostly* well *most* of the time. (I need those qualifiers though.) In an *Atlantic* essay I have often taught in my own college composition classrooms, author Erika Christakis[3] writes:

> Our public education system is about much more than personal achievement; it is about preparing people to work together to advance not just themselves but society. Unfortunately, the current debate's focus on individual rights and choices has distracted many politicians and policymakers from a key stakeholder: our nation as a whole. As a result, a cynicism has taken root that

[2] Megan Brenan, "K-12 Parents Remain Largely Satisfied With Child's Education," *Gallup,* August 26, 2021, https://news.gallup.com/poll/354083/parents-remain-largely-satisfied-child-education.aspx.

[3] Erika Christakis, "Americans Have Given Up On Public Schools. That's a Mistake," *Atlantic*, October 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/10/the-war-on-public-schools/537903/.

> suggests there is no hope for public education. This is demonstrably false. It's also dangerous.

I read this and recognize that my criticism is contributing to that cynicism. I am another voice lilting high in the choir of mostly-jacked up claims of public school failure—a choir that I also recognize is eager to serve the far-right political desire to dismantle our national faith in the public education system in order to gain traction for definitively inequitable alternative options, thereby paving the way for more entrenched segregation, religious indoctrination, and the privileging of the already privileged. I have no desire to side with that. In fact, I find their current nonsensical drumbeating over schools' alleged teaching of Critical Race Theory, their anti-LGBTQIA+ rhetoric, and their book bans vile, repellent, and unethical.

But here I am, lamenting the public system. *What kind of privilege…?* the voice in my own head asks me.

Still, I am compelled to tell you the truth: What I have experienced—both as a student and then as a parent—is that the massive machine of public education is intransigent, grinding, and (like all machines) necessarily impassive to the grief of the people who get caught in its gears.

IV.

Let me rewind again to the rough spring of 2015. The resolution to my family's trouble with the district gifted program eventually presented itself when we found what seemed at the time like a miracle—a private school that—if we stretched and scrimped and were awarded some financial aid (and we were)—we could actually afford. The school was small, claimed to be constructivist and child-centered, and its pedagogy was distinctly progressive (think no grades, no tests, no desks, no punishments). We moved our son there (and enrolled our daughter in the school's preschool program too). Our boy's anxiety lifted like a fog clearing. His teachers' reports in his first year there complimented his curiosity, told us he was a good collaborator, and noted his burgeoning leadership skills. He made friends, relaxed, and grew.

As part of my parental journey into progressive education at this school, I was offered a recommended reading list compiled by the school's leadership, and I made my way through Piaget and Bruner and Dewey, Freire and bell hooks. From John Dewey, I read this: "Education is a social process; education is growth; education is not preparation for life but is life itself." I copied the line into my notebook and scribbled next to it *Yes! YES!*

The choice to put our children in a private school was less celebrated by our extended family, however. When my husband and I told them about our decision to withdraw from public education, they were characteristically sympathetic and supportive, but clearly concerned. They asked if we were sure. What if every parent with our advantages decided to abandon public education? And wouldn't private school be expensive? Why would we spend our savings on P-12 tuition instead of saving that money for college? Weren't there ways we could better advocate for our son—and all kids—while remaining in our neighborhood school? And what about the opportunities available to us outside of the school day? Maybe extracurriculars could be a solution to our son's boredom and restlessness. Athletics! Arts! Couldn't he do music lessons? Moreover, I understood them to be asking beneath their directly spoken questions, why were we expecting the school system to do all the work? Where was our sense of personal responsibility as parents? Where was our sense of community obligation?

I don't mean to paint our extended family as anything but the extremely engaged and endlessly supportive people that they are. We are lucky in many ways, and family support is first among them. But I know their values, and we were violating them.

I also know my own history as a student.

What I haven't told you yet is that, like my son, I also struggled in school, though my parents responded to my struggle somewhat differently than I have responded to my son's. An early and avid reader and writer, like my boy, I too was often bored in my P-12 classes, though unlike him, I responded by withdrawing at school and erupting in anger at home. I too was moved into a gifted and talented class, and I too found it stressful rather than motivating. As a third grader in 1987, I was a member of an early iteration of my school district's accelerated learning program. Just like my son, I was bused from my neighborhood school to another public elementary in the district, where—just like my son's class—my cohort of "gifted" children was set apart from the rest of the school community (the "neighborhood kids") and given lessons that were—in my recollection—not more progressive but simply more work. As a child, I found school to be anxiety-provoking. I often had stomach aches before the school day began. I remember crying at my desk on more than one occasion. On one distinct day during my first-grade year, my mother was called to collect me because I had what we'd now name a panic attack during a timed multiplication test (back then I was just labeled "sensitive"). I was a perfectionist—afraid to fail, afraid to not already know whatever I was meant to be just learning. The gifted program's heavy workload and emphasis on high achievement exacerbated my anxiety. In middle school, this anxiety and perfectionism

hit a crisis point, and I missed the last month of seventh grade. When I returned in the fall to start eighth grade, it was with the understanding that there was no alternative: School was an experience I just had to get through. In the end, though, I managed a way out. I left my public high school at the end of my sophomore year to attend community college full-time in a dual enrollment program Washington State still funds (Running Start). This was my escape from both the academic and social misery of high school. I graduated with excellent grades and a well-developed sense that if you just looked hard enough, there was always another way to solve a problem.

In college I found my stride. I was free from rote lessons and worksheets and the feeling that so much time was drained by bureaucratic tasks and student management. For the first time, there were deep conversations about texts, the opportunity to write beyond the bounds of the dreaded five-paragraph essay, and the freedom to take class time to explore questions without the teacher's eyes drifting to the clock. It was liberating, and it reminded me that I loved learning.

In conversation with my parents about how to educate my own son, this history came back to me.

"You got through," my mother said, edge of parental pain in her voice when I reminded her of our past. (Let me offer you the complication of guilt in this calculus. Parenthood is relentlessly humbling.) "It wasn't so bad, right?"

Yes, I did get through. But wasn't that the problem? Is getting through enough? Is it what we must settle for? Did I want my son to have to wait until college (or at least his junior year of high school, when he, too, could enroll in community college through Running Start) to love learning again?

The answer for me was *No.*

My family's move from public school to private was our first attempt to live into that *No.* And initially it seemed like we'd struck educational gold and landed on a real solution that I couldn't believe more families weren't seeking—progressive education. I became for a time something of an evangelist for the "progressive ed movement." Perhaps I should be more ashamed of this—of the way I fairly guzzled the Kool-Aid, so to speak—but as a parent, I felt I'd discovered a cure for what had ailed my son and for what had plagued my own school years, and I wanted to share it with all the parents I knew whose children were similarly struggling in school. *It doesn't have to be this way!* I wanted to shout. Instead, I started inviting friends to come to our little independent school and witness the magic themselves.

When they took me up on the offer, I knew exactly what they'd see first and fall in love with themselves: the idyllic landscape of the school's grounds, which replaced the typical school blacktop and blank basketball court with a canopy of trees that opened onto a field blooming in dandelions and edged by a creek. Kids' imaginations and bodies need green space, the school believed, more than structured play areas. The school itself was in an open floor-plan converted house, where kids of all ages meandered between classrooms freely; there were art supplies and books and science tools cluttering seemingly every surface; and around tables or seated on rugs, kids spent their school hours actively engaged, talking, and *doing* all the time.

The day one friend took me up on a visit, she came upon an elementary-age science class in discovery mode: a group of barefoot kids ankle-deep in the creek, collecting water samples into plastic test tubes. She widened her eyes, said, "I feel like I went through the wardrobe." And then, wistfully, "I wish I'd had this."

It's what all adults said when they saw this school.

"I wish every kid had this," I agreed with her.

And years later, there's part of me that still wishes that.

V.

But let me fold time for you again and offer you another scene to parallel the one that opened this essay:

Follow me to February of 2022. Years have passed, as they do when one is raising children, both creepingly slowly and somehow also all at once.

It is almost cherry blossom season in the Seattle area once more, and on this particular morning, the sky is bellied in gray clouds ready to burst, and I am standing in the parking lot of my neighborhood public high school, enrollment paperwork in my hand. Beside me is the boy who launched me on this journey through American education at age six. He is now fifteen. He crosses the parking lot in his new loping, slouchy teenage stride. He is six feet tall and broad shouldered—a man, if you catch him from the corner of your eye—but beneath that stance, he is still freckled, still curly-headed, and still wide-eyed behind the glasses he now wears. That fidgety nature that once got him into trouble at school has, like so much of my boy, coiled inward lately—part typical adolescent self-consciousness and part post-COVID-19 pandemic-isolation social anxiety. While he presents as calm and easy-going on the outside, I know that on the inside he is a murmuration of worries.

What led us here—back to the doorway of our neighborhood public school six years after leaving it—was a constellation of history and economics and—once more—despair. The COVID-19 pandemic hit in the middle of my son's seventh-grade year. That spring, while the world unraveled, so did the plans my husband and I had built for our kids. My husband spent two months furloughed from his job. We pulled from savings to manage tuition at the little progressive school we'd joined back in 2015, and we got through the year. That summer, I took on extra tutoring. We'd catch up, we thought. We could still make it all work. But then, in late-fall of 2020, I was told that my teaching contract was being reduced to less than full-time, and—in a stroke of painful bad luck—we simultaneously lost our financial aid. Our kids' school was changing their tuition assistance policy, and after six years of receiving it, we were no longer eligible for aid.

Just like that, private education became an impossibility for our family.

We had devoted years of our free hours as parent volunteers, given whatever donation money we could scrape together, and knit what I believed were lasting and strong community bonds. The school had become a place we all truly loved. A second home to my kids. But private schools are (necessarily) businesses as well as educational communities, and in the end, we were just customers who couldn't pay. (I teach literature. I should have known that all utopias end like this.)

It takes personal sacrifice to give your children a quality education, their office told us in the form letter we received denying our application for tuition assistance. Maybe we wanted to take additional equity out of our home to continue to pay for school, beyond our first mortgage?

This was devastating. But it was also our comeuppance. I am an idealist, but I am not, it turns out, as entitled as I've perhaps seemed here. All along, I was aware of the precariousness of our position, and also of the sometimes-queasiness I felt at that school's culture of self-congratulation and exceptionalism. I was aware of the privilege embedded within the school's culture—both the privilege of which I was a part, and also that from which I was excluded, even while I paid what our tuition assistance didn't cover (a total out-of-pocket expense to our family that came to thousands of dollars each year—roughly the equivalent of a year's full tuition at our nearest public university, per child). Still, as a union electrician and an untenured educator, my husband and I were at the bottom of that school's social class hierarchy—a reality that was often apparent to us, but which glared at moments like the school's yearly fundraising auction, where families easily dropped tens of thousands of dollars over plates of catered Chicken Cordon Bleu and stuffed peppers and glass after glass of pricey