

US: Reopening and Rethinking Schools: Care vs. the Carceral Continuum

Sunday 14 June 2020, by [WILSON Anastasia](#) (Date first published: 10 June 2020).

The coronavirus pandemic has acutely exposed a fundamental contradiction of capitalism: as the [Ricardo Levins Morales poster](#) states “capitalism is not healthy for children or other living things”. The false tradeoff between the economy and life now holds many working people and children hostage: go back to work and back to school, or the economy tanks. But in an age where the politics of austerity have cut off material resources to public K-12 schools, while simultaneously maintaining reliance on policing and punishment in schools, we have to ask, what exactly does it mean to *safely* reopen schools?

One of the most gaslighting tendencies of the discussions and think-pieces on reopening schools, is magical thinking about the resources actually available to schools: plans without real substance, ideas without the funding, training, and staffing behind them to actually be implemented. Schools were already the shock absorbers for a broken capitalist economy augmenting its austerity with carcerality at the expense of Black, Latinx, Indigenous people and people of color, and undervaluing the care provided by this last lifeline of a social safety net. Realizing this has implications for how we actually reopen and rethink schools going forward.

First, I do not claim to be an expert on reopening K-12 schools or on how to run a public school. I do however claim to be an economist with an okay understanding of labor economics and of the scope of inequality in public schools. From a labor economics point of view, it is clear that those who work on the shop floor of K-12 schools should be the ones consulted for planning a reopening: teachers, school nurses, school lunch staff, counselors, janitors, and other school support staff and their unions have the expertise on what schools will need in order to operate healthfully in a global pandemic that disproportionately impacts Black, Latinx, and Indigenous communities. Similarly, parents and children need a say in what their needs are going forward. [Economists have urged workplaces to have worker-run health and safety boards](#); schools are no exception. Recall, before this health crisis even began, it was unions — like the Chicago Teachers Union — fighting for more teachers, nurses, and counselors in our schools in order to meet the physical and emotional needs of students. The 2019 Chicago Teachers Union Strike was exactly to [demand a nurse in every school](#).

A Safe School for Who?

School safety implies a healthy environment, but discussions around safety in past decades have conflated safety with control and over-policing- — the so called ‘school to prison pipeline’ So, we need to interrogate what terms like “safe” school have meant up to now, and what they will and should mean going forward.

In my dissertation research on understanding the economics and political economy of how the carceral state intersects with public schooling to produce and reinforce racial inequality, and how schools are a part of the dynamics of mass incarceration, I have spent time interrogating exactly what we mean when we assert the need for “safe” and “good” schools. Like many words we use to

describe institutions and economies — for example, “efficient” — these words are not neutral and have a direction. Economists fetishize the notion of efficiency, developing entire theories on tradeoffs and methods of cost-benefit analysis to determine if something is or is not efficient. If there were a singular lesson from the world of political economy and heterodox economics -or just critical thinking — that I could convey to all, it would be to always question the direction of words like “efficient”. “Efficient” for who? “Efficient” for what? For example, poverty wages with no benefits and no paid sick leave are efficient for profits, but disastrous for workers. Similarly, [just-in-time PPE supply chains are efficient for the bottom line](#) of private-equity backed hospitals, but not for health and safety of healthcare workers and patients during a pandemic.

Like efficiency, words such as “safe” carry a similar veil, appearing on the surface as unquestionable moral or economic imperatives, but questioning “safe” for who, “safe for what”, by whose standards?, reveals something different. One example of this is the idea of a “good” school being one conforming to the neoliberal metrics of high test scores and high completion rates. But we know [these measures themselves are biased](#) and accessible mainly to the privileged. Pauline Lipman’s book on [the New Political Economy of Urban Education](#) brings together how these metrics coupled with neoliberal school reforms like “high stakes accountability” facilitate dispossession and displacement of Black and Latinx communities in urban spaces, contributing to urban gentrification. What about the word “safe” — is that also a word we can interrogate, even in an era where the term conjures memories of abhorrent acts of mass violence in schools? The word “safe” is not neutral. “Safe” for who and from whom? The notion of safety too has a direction. The 1980s [War on Drugs, conjuring fears of the mythical “superpredator” and “youth violence,” coalesced to create a notion of school safety that is distinctly racialized](#). Policing in schools, physical security measures like metal detectors, and surveillance all target Black students and students of color, amplify the [already existing disparities in being disciplined in school](#), and treat students like suspects or criminals rather than children. Actual acts of mass violence in schools, usually perpetrated by students not targeted by these school safety measures, become fodder for further fortifying our schools, [despite no clear connection between supposed safety measures and reducing these acts of violence](#). So when we ask “safe for who?” and look at how “school safety” is actually implemented in schools, it’s clear that many forms of supposed safety are in fact safety for white folks, or at least for the white imaginary which projects criminality onto Black children and children of color (for further insights into interrogating safety and innocence, see Jackie Wang’s insightful essay [Against Innocence: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Safety](#)).

The Carceral Continuum

In many schools, budgets, staffing, and priorities have shifted towards serving the interests of the carceral state rather than focusing on the care that children need. One example of this is the No Excuses school model. The No Excuses approach is popular with the charter school movement, where schools look a lot like a discipline boot camp and some even [explicitly adhere to a “broken windows style” model of school discipline focusing “relentlessly on appropriate consequences for small issues”](#). Research has shown this model of schooling explicitly [conflates punitive discipline and caring for students](#). But the No Excuses model is found beyond just the charter schools formally adopting this approach. Schools across the United States take on a carceral environment in the name of “school safety” with policing and security staff, using physical security like metal detectors and surveillance, and adhering to harsh disciplinary policies that disproportionately target and punish especially Black students and students of color, with detrimental impacts on their lives, especially those [then pushed into interactions with the criminal justice system](#). Students attending schools with police are [3.5 times more likely to face arrest](#). Black students, Latinx students, Native students, and students with disabilities disproportionately are criminalized in school. These measures make schools part of the *carceral continuum* — a term used by Carla Shedd in her work

[Unequal City: Race, Schools, and Perceptions of Injustice](#) which critically examines how this nexus of public schooling and the carceral state operates in the schools and spaces traversed by students in Chicago Public Schools.

With so much focus on discipline and punishment, are schools prepared and staffed sufficiently to actually care for students, or will the pandemic reinforce the dynamics of the carceral continuum?

A [2019 report from the ACLU titled Cops And No Counselors](#) starkly outlines the underinvestment in school support for students, and overinvestment in the carceral continuum. The report analyzes data from the Civil Rights Data Collective which tracks the demographic composition of schools, use of school discipline across schools, as well as staffing and expenditures in schools. These data show the skewed staffing levels across many schools: an estimated 1.7 million students attend a school with police but no counselor, 3 million attend a school with police but no school nurse, 6 million attend a school with police but no school psychologist, and 10 million attend a school with police but no social worker. Many schools and districts across the country do not meet the recommended student-to-staff ratios for nurses, counselors, psychologists, and social workers. In 2018, National Association of School Nurses also reported extreme [shortages of school nurses in schools](#). Even before the pandemic, we urgently needed to be rethinking why schools have become an apparatus of the carceral state, and how to radically change schools into transformative sites of care. But especially now, as the pandemic highlights the lack of appropriate staffing to deal with the physical health as well as emotional and social health of students, reprioritizing school budgets and staffing towards care and away from the carceral continuum is critically urgent.

Rethinking and Rebuilding Schools as Sites of Care

What if we could rethink schools altogether to focus on being sites of care? Reopening schools particularly during a health and economic crisis brings forward this possibility. So what do schools already do? In a recent [Haymarket Books livestream](#), Eve Ewing (author of [Ghosts in the Schoolyard: Racism and School Closings on Chicago's South Side](#) amongst many other incredible projects) and Jen Johnston of the [Chicago Teachers Union](#) discussed What A School Means during this pandemic. The conversation emphasized things that many teachers, children, and families already know: as one of the very last universal safety nets, schools and specifically teachers and support staff, are often on the front lines of providing care, nutrition, health services, counseling and mental health services, and generally helping to meet the material needs of students. Some districts now are finding ways to continue to provide these crucial materials and services, offering to-go meals and [even stipends for families](#). In the livestream, Ewing and Johnston discussed important considerations for reopening: what about making space for grief and feelings? Can these emotional caring functions also be part of our metrics of a good school? What if we rethink schools to include the important caring work of cultivating physical and emotional health?

A reopening will inevitably have to contend with the aftermath of the pandemic, including grief and feelings, as well as the material struggles faced by children and families in one of the worst economic crises in history. The pandemic made stark the importance of care already happening in schools: in the U.S., [over 50 million children attend public schools for at least 180 days of the year](#) and 6.8 hours a day. Schools are often the frontline for families lacking resources, while schools themselves are under resourced. Before the pandemic, [30 million children](#) and families were deeply reliant on the food available in schools, and food insecurity is amplifying each day. Many schools already face issues of [overcrowded classrooms](#) and inadequate staffing. Most children in public schools are [living at or near poverty](#). Austerity economics and a rigged labor market coupled with the carceral state has left many schools unprepared to reopen in accordance with [the guidelines of the CDC](#). The current economic crisis is putting further budgetary pressures on schools, with many districts already facing cuts, constraints, and what [NPR described as a financial meltdown](#).

But without radical reinvestment in the caring capacities of schools, how exactly do we plan to reopen schools as healthy environments for children and for workers?

I would suggest that any school reopening plan is guided by its workers — especially teachers, nurses, support staff, janitors, and so on — and the needs of children and families, and such a plan radically reinvests in the caring and support functions of schools: teachers, nurses, counselors, social workers, safely maintained buildings, and so on. Further, we know virtual schooling for now is flawed, but we are also beginning to understand that the value of care and education provided by schools also might imply compensating families and students for the work of homeschooling. More basic, as virtual learning continues and [the digital divide compounds](#), offering universal internet access seems more important than ever. As concerns about how the pandemic will impact issues of surveillance and policing arise, we can't overlook how these issues already overlapped with schools. Both the disparities in schooling and the disparities of the coronavirus pandemic are [rooted in and directly caused by racial capitalism](#). The carceral state upholds racial capitalism, both in neighborhoods and in schools. But if we can rethink and reopen schools as sites of care for everyone, especially those students most impacted by this pandemic, and maybe even undo racialized notions of safety — perhaps we can build schools as truly safe and transformative spaces that focus on care instead of perpetuating the carceral continuum.

Anastasia C. Wilson is a PhD candidate in economics at UMass Amherst and incoming assistant professor of economics at Hobart and William Smith Colleges.

[Click here](#) to subscribe to our weekly newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

P.S.

Solidarity

https://solidarity-us.org/reopening_and_rethinking_schools/