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THE STUDENTS LEFT BEHIND BY REMOTE LEARNING

The desire to protect children may put their long-term well-being at stake.

By Alec MacGillis September 28, 2020

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Shemar, a twelve-year-old from East Baltimore, is good at math, and Karen Ngosso, his fourth-grade math teacher, at Abbottston Elementary School, is one reason why. "I would try to pump him up and tell him, 'You're a good student,' " she said. But she knew that he didn't get enough sleep, and he was often absent. His home situation, like those of many of her students, was unstable: his mother suffered from drug addiction, and they moved frequently.

Ngosso kept an eye on Shemar even after he started fifth grade, which is when I met him, in late 2018, at First & Franklin Presbyterian Church, a few blocks from the transitional housing where he and his mother were living. I volunteered to tutor Shemar, and once a week I picked him up from school and we'd do homework at a coffee shop.

Shemar has a remarkably good sense of direction, which came in handy when he had to catch multiple buses and the light rail to get to school from wherever home happened to be. He has a knack for impish one-liners, often prefaced by "Can I just say something?" He is the only kid I've tutored who will, without fail, stop mid-text to ask about a word he doesn't recognize. "Personification?"

he'll ask. "What's that?" His own vocabulary is charmingly esoteric—once, he said that an older sister had "bamboozled" him into going to the store; another time, he asked me to tighten his swim goggles "just a smidgen."

His mother takes Suboxone every day at a clinic, but stability is elusive. She and Shemar often stay up late watching TV, and when Shemar made it to school he was often drowsy in class. But being around teachers and other kids revived him. I continued to see him when he entered sixth grade, and on days when I picked him up he was typically tearing around the jungle gym with friends, with an unself-consciousness that, together with his slight frame, made him seem younger than twelve. Sometimes he'd help his social-studies teacher, a young woman in her first year on the job, straighten up her classroom.

One day, when I arrived, Shemar (this is his middle name) looked disconsolate. He thrust a sheet of paper at me—the social-studies teacher had quit. There was a tear running down Shemar's cheek. "She was my favorite teacher," he said.

By early March, there was a new social-studies teacher. Shemar's English class was reading "Farewell to Manzanar," a young-adult novel about the internment camps for Japanese-Americans during the Second World War. The hallways were decorated with posters for Black History Month. Shemar had made one about Bisi Ezerioha, the Nigerian-American engineer and race-car driver.

Then, on March 16th, as the coronavirus pandemic took hold in the United States, Maryland closed its schools.

Like districts across the country, Baltimore's was unprepared. Initially, teachers made worksheets for each grade level, which parents had to pick up at school. Shemar's school was three miles from his grandmother's house, where he was living at the time, so I picked up the packet, along with one of the boxes of sliced-apple snacks that the school was handing out.

Remote learning started in earnest on April 6th. For Shemar, that meant just four hours per week of live online instruction—an hour for each of the main subjects once a week, with nothing on Fridays. Shemar had an Xbox but no computer, so the pastor at our church, Rob Hoch, said that it would reimburse me for buying Shemar a laptop. I dropped it off at his grandmother's house, and helped his mother load onto her phone the app, called Remind, that Shemar's teachers used for communicating with families. It required finding links and codes from weeks earlier. I felt slightly frantic, knowing that, in the early pandemic period, every minute spent together in the house brought greater risk.

It soon became clear that, even with the computer, this form of schooling wasn't going to work for Shemar. He had a wireless connection at his grandmother's house, but he spent some of his days at a row house, a mile to the southwest, that his mother had moved into, in one of her repeated efforts to establish a home for them. A few weeks earlier, a twenty-one-year-old man had been killed a block away. There was no Internet, and when his mother called Comcast to ask about the free Wi-Fi it was offering to the families of Baltimore schoolchildren, she was told that a previous tenant had applied, so she couldn't

do so herself. It was a familiar situation for her: so often, when she made an effort on her son's behalf, it foundered quickly in a bureaucratic dead end.

The Remind app was another problem. Shemar downloaded it on his phone, which had no cellular service but could be used with Wi-Fi. But, when his mother lost or broke her phone, she borrowed Shemar's. He often missed the reminders about his daily classes or the links to access them, which might change from week to week. I had the app on my phone, and every few days I got a message from him, asking me to send him the link and the schedule.

The biggest challenge was not technological. No one made sure that Shemar logged on to his daily class or completed the assignments that were piling up in his Google Classroom account. His grandmother, who is in her seventies, is a steady presence, but she attended little school while growing up, in a sharecropping family in South Carolina. She was also losing her eyesight. One day, she explained to me the family's struggles to assist Shemar: though three of his four older siblings lived in the house, too, they had jobs or attended vocational school, and one of them had a baby to care for; Shemar's mother was often absent; and his great-uncle, who also lived in the house, had dropped out of school in South Carolina around the age of eight, and was illiterate.

Shemar's teachers worried about him but had a hard time reaching him, given his mother's frequent changes of phone number. One time, his English teacher drove to his house and visited with him on the small front porch.

I checked on Shemar a couple of times during the spring, but, in hindsight, I was too willing to let the lockdown serve as an excuse to hunker down with my own kids, who were doing online learning at other Baltimore public schools. So I was startled when I received a text message in May from Shemar's fourth sibling, who worked at an Amazon warehouse and lived with his girlfriend and baby, asking for the link to the day's class. Shemar had moved in with them.

The following Sunday, I dropped by the house with some groceries. Shemar's mother, who had been evicted from her row house, was there, too, and Shemar

was in good spirits. But, the next afternoon, he was alone in the living room, the lights off, the blinds drawn, and the TV on. He had stayed up very late the night before, watching TV with his mother, and had slept past noon, missing that day's class. For breakfast, he had eaten some Nutella that I had brought by the day before. I asked what he would have for dinner, assuming he would eat with his brother's family. In fact, they usually ate on their own, upstairs. "Nutella," he said.

One day, I wrote him on Instagram to ask if he was in his English class, and was cheered when he responded that he was. But he and one other student were the only ones there. The link for the class had changed at the last moment and he hadn't received the message. He and his classmate had been sitting in their virtual space for twenty minutes, waiting for the teacher.

I have chosen to tell the story of Shemar's remote-learning difficulties, with his family's permission, because it was his plight that alerted me to the fact that remote learning was proving disastrous. As the spring went on, I grew increasingly distressed by the lack of public alarm over students like Shemar, who were sitting in countless dark rooms, safe from COVID-19, perhaps, but adrift and alone. Society's attention to them has always been spotty, but they had at least been visible—one saw them on the way to school, in their blue or burgundy uniforms, or in the park and the playground afterward. Now they were behind closed doors, and so were we, with full license to turn inward. While we dutifully stayed home to flatten the curve, children like Shemar were invisible.

Ryan Hooper, who teaches social studies at Joseph C. Briscoe Academy, a middle and high school for high-needs kids, told me that, of his typical class of between five and ten students, only one or two generally logged on for his sessions. Often, no one showed up.

Hooper, a twenty-eight-year-old native of Cleveland, became a teacher after serving in the Army. The kids at Briscoe, he said, were "very challenging students that come from awful situations." Many are so emotionally troubled that, even with such small class sizes, each teacher is assigned a paraprofessional

to help out in the room. But Hooper liked the challenge and the close bonds that came with the intensive interaction.

With the shift to remote instruction, he felt a "loss of purpose," he said. "All the gratifying, purpose-driven reward benefits of being a teacher were stripped." At first, he and his colleagues called to check on the students who weren't logging on, but the calls only further overwhelmed their parents and guardians, roughly half of whom are foster parents. Some districts in Massachusetts alerted child-protection agencies about students who did not log on, but Baltimore did not take that step.

Another young teacher in Baltimore, who taught reading to a middle-school special-education class, told me that three of his ten kids never showed up online. One boy told him that his mother had just lost her job. "I don't want to do it," he said, of remote learning. "I don't care if I fail. I'm fourteen, in seventh grade—I don't think they're going to fail me again." He was right. Students in Baltimore were not penalized for failing to do the work—their third-quarter grade would carry over into the fourth quarter, though they could get bonus points for making an effort.

The school alerted parents that they could get free laptops, but only one of the special-ed teacher's students made an appointment to get one. The other six students who sometimes logged on did so with smartphones, which made it more difficult to use Google Docs, the program used for most assignments. The students rarely turned their cameras on. "None of them like showing their faces," the teacher said. "You don't know if they're there or not." One time, a girl did turn her camera on, and he saw paint peeling off the walls behind her.

The teacher was driving downtown one weekday when he saw one of his students from a summer-school class last year washing windshields at an intersection. When the boy saw his former teacher, he panicked and ran away.

The United States was a pioneer in universal education. In 1797, Samuel Harrison Smith, a Washington newspaper editor, won an essay contest

with a piece making the case for why it was essential to the country's success. "An enlightened nation is always most tenacious of its rights," he wrote. The new nation was strikingly free of the British upper-class fear that educating the working class would give it dangerous ideas—with the major exception of slaveowners, who withheld schooling for that very reason. Those in power in the North and the Midwest, as Carl Kaestle notes in "Pillars of the Republic," his 1983 history of schooling in the early U.S., saw education as a means of alleviating poverty and squalor in rapidly growing cities and helping to assimilate immigrants.

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, a patchwork of schooling spread across the U.S. In small-town New England, and eventually in the Midwest as well, "district schools" mixed children of all ages, including "trundle-bed trash," as people called kids barely past toddlerhood. Students showed up with whatever primer they could obtain, and corporal punishment was so prevalent that schools often employed women as teachers only in the summer, when the older boys that they would have trouble physically subjugating worked in the fields.

Coastal cities had a few "charity schools" for the urban poor, supported by churches and philanthropists who wanted to break the generational cycle of poverty. "One of the central goals of charity-school workers was to rescue children from an allegedly harmful family environment," Kaestle writes.

Increasing numbers of state and local governments in the North and the Midwest began authorizing taxation to pay for public schools. Reformers recognized that the way to build support for taxes was to create a school system that would be used by all. "If taxation was going to work, it could not only be for the benefit of 'other people's children,' " Jack Schneider, a professor of education at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell, told me. "It had to benefit everyone."

By mid-century, more than ninety-five per cent of adults in New England could read and write, and three-quarters of children between the ages of five and

nineteen were enrolled in school; the rest of the North was not far behind. “In no country in the world is the taste for reading so diffused among the people as in America,” a Swedish visitor wrote, in 1853. Public schools, the New York governor, William Seward, said, were “the great levelling institutions of the age . . . not by levelling all to the condition of the base, but by elevating all to the association of the wise and good.”

In the South, however, slaveowners denied instruction to nearly all the Black children they claimed as property, and local and state governments lagged behind in building public schools. Even in the North, Horace Mann and other reformers were reluctant to push for integrating the new systems, and the children of free Black families mostly remained in separate schools.

It took decades more to realize truly universal education. Episodes in this country and elsewhere have shown the consequences of failing to provide that basic good. The destruction caused by the Second World War, for example, affected a generation of children. One researcher found “significant, long-lasting detrimental effects” on German children, with those in the most heavily bombed cities completing 1.2 years less of school and seeing their future earnings decrease by an average of six per cent. Other studies found similar effects among children who were evacuated from London—as the authors of one study put it, “Participants describe a whole different life they believe they could have had if they had had the opportunities they feel they lost.”

Research conducted six months after Hurricane Katrina found that about twenty per cent of students in New Orleans were either not enrolled in school or had missed more than ten days a month. One study reportedly found that, five years after the storm, roughly a third of the city’s children had been held back, nearly double the average in the South; another study reportedly found that the average seven-year-old in New Orleans at the time of the hurricane was, a decade later, more likely than his or her counterparts in all but two cities in the country to be neither employed nor attending school.

Prince Edward County, in Virginia, is one of the most wrenching examples of

such disruptions. In 1954, when the Supreme Court, in Brown v. Board of Education, ruled against school segregation, districts across the South threatened to close their public schools to avoid integrating them. But only one place actually did so for an extended period: Prince Edward County, west of Richmond. In 1959, the county board of supervisors eliminated the entire school budget, for some twenty-one schools and an estimated three thousand students. White families raised tens of thousands of dollars for a new private high school, and received offers of temporary space from, among others, the Presbyterian Church, the Moose Lodge, and the Woman's Club House. Textbook suppliers donated books, other districts donated buses, and leaders of the new academy stripped the public schools of books, desks, and football goalposts.

The county's Black community lacked the resources to establish private schools for the roughly fifteen hundred Black students. About sixty-one of them were taken in by Kittrell College, a Black institution in North Carolina. Other children went to live with relatives in Philadelphia, Boston, and New York; in some cases, siblings were dispersed permanently.

Many kids simply went without school. Ricky Brown, who would have been in kindergarten that year, spent his days idly, occasionally joining some seventy-five students who attended "training centers" set up in the basement of the Reverend L. Francis Griffin's church. "The only thing I got out of that was how to spell my name and the alphabet," Brown told Kristen Green, in "Something Must Be Done About Prince Edward County," her 2015 book on the shutdown. That was more education, though, than McCarthy Eanes received: Green recounts that Eanes and his fifteen or so school-aged siblings stayed home on their family's tobacco farm.

The closure lasted five years, until the Supreme Court ordered the county schools to reopen and desegregate. When they did open, in the fall of 1964, as few as eight of the roughly fifteen hundred students were white. The Michigan State University researcher Robert L. Green estimated that thirteen hundred

Black children in the county received no formal education during the closure. He also found that the illiteracy rates for Black students under twenty-two went from three per cent to twenty-three per cent. Years later, Doug Vaughan, who became a garment worker, tried to teach himself to read using Harlequin romances. "I always wondered, 'Where would I be if I had gone to school, completed it, and gotten an education?' " he told Kristen Green. "Where would I be in life?"

Sonja Santelises's parents went to segregated Black high schools in the Deep South during the fights over Brown v. Board and the white flight to "segregation academies." They raised her in Massachusetts, after her father got a job as a chemist for Eastman Kodak. In 2016, having spent several decades as a school administrator in New York, Boston, and Baltimore, Santelises became the head of the Baltimore school system. She insisted on high expectations for Black and brown children, who make up ninety per cent of the district's seventy-nine thousand students. This led her to conclude that the academic costs for Baltimore's children of keeping schools closed this fall needed to weigh heavily in any calculation.

As a trial run for opening, and to provide catch-up for at least some of the students who'd lost ground in the spring, the city offered in-person summer-school instruction at six schools. About two hundred children attended. It was one of only a few in-person summer schools around the country.

The Baltimore schools are perpetually strapped for resources: among other deficits, sixty buildings lack air-conditioning, which forces frequent closures in hot weather. But administrators were getting advice from experts at the local college, Johns Hopkins University, which is home to one of the country's largest schools of public health and which had created a leading coronavirus database. Among Hopkins's experts is Jennifer Nuzzo, an epidemiologist whose work focusses on outbreak detection and response. Nuzzo had supported lockdowns to slow the spread of the coronavirus in the spring, but by the summer she was arguing that schools should plan to reopen in much of the country. In an Op-Ed

in the *Times* on July 1st, Nuzzo and Joshua Sharfstein, a pediatrician who has served as Baltimore's health commissioner and Maryland's health secretary, wrote that the coronavirus had mostly spared young people: children made up nearly a quarter of the American population but accounted for just two per cent of known COVID-19 cases; they had been hospitalized at a rate of 0.1 per hundred thousand, compared with 7.4 per hundred thousand in adults between the ages of fifty and sixty-four. The authors mentioned studies from France and Australia suggesting that children were not major transmitters of the virus. And they noted that the American Academy of Pediatrics favored school reopening. "The disruption of learning can have lifetime effects on students' income and health," they wrote.

A number of experts were beginning to agree with Nuzzo and Sharfstein. According to reports, the rate of infection among teachers in Sweden, which as part of its less restrictive response to the virus had left most of its schools open, was no greater than it was in neighboring Finland, which had closed all its schools. "They found that teachers had the same risk of COVID as the average of other professions," said Martin Kulldorff, a professor at Harvard Medical School who develops statistical and epidemiological methods for disease surveillance.

In July, Meira Levinson, a professor of education at Harvard, co-authored an article in *The New England Journal of Medicine* laying out how to reopen primary schools. Levinson told me that she worried about what students would lose without in-person instruction. "Education is about learning to trust others and being vulnerable with others. If you are learning, you are doing something—at least for a while—you don't know how to do," she said. "That's a vulnerable position to be in, and as human beings we need to have relationships with some level of trust to be able to do that."

Joseph Allen, the director of the Healthy Buildings program at Harvard's school of public health, wrote a sixty-two-page plan with a dozen colleagues listing steps that schools could take to reduce transmission risk. To improve ventilation and air quality, schools with air-conditioning could upgrade their air filters,

while schools without it could make sure that their windows opened and set up fans to circulate fresh air from outdoors; when it got too cold for that, they could install portable air purifiers. Notably, the recommendations did not include a hybrid model, with students in school a limited number of days per week to allow for social distancing—students did not need to be spaced out much more than usual, Allen said, as long as they wore masks. "There's certainly no such thing as zero risk in anything we do, and that is certainly the case during a pandemic," he said in a conference call to present the plan. But, he added, "there are devastating costs of keeping kids out of school. When we have this discussion about sending kids back to school, we have to have it in the context of the massive individual and societal costs of keeping kids at home."

Santelises found many of the claims persuasive. Baltimore worked on a plan to bring students into school two days a week, while allowing families the option of full remote learning if they preferred. Teachers with health concerns would do online instruction for kids who stayed home. As the Harvard report recommended, the schools would upgrade air-conditioners with better filters; schools lacking them would finally get windows that could be opened.

On July 7th, President Trump held a series of events at the White House with Betsy DeVos, his Secretary of Education, to demand that schools open. "We're very much going to put pressure on governors and everybody else to open the schools," he said. "It's very important for our country. It's very important for the well-being of the student and the parents. So we're going to be putting a lot of pressure on: open your schools in the fall."

The effect of Trump's declaration was instantaneous. Teachers who had been responsive to the idea of returning to the classroom suddenly regarded the prospect much more warily. "Our teachers were ready to go back as long as it was safe," Randi Weingarten, the longtime president of the American Federation of Teachers, told me. "Then Trump and DeVos played their political bullshit." Ryan Hooper, the former soldier, saw the effect on his colleagues. "It was really unhelpful," he said.

A week later, the Baltimore Teachers Union and the Maryland State Education Association sent a four-page letter to the Maryland governor, Larry Hogan, a Republican, and the state superintendent of schools, Karen Salmon, calling on them to bar any in-person instruction for the first semester. They noted that, by one count, nearly a quarter of teachers nationwide were considered especially susceptible to the virus, and cited the lack of funding for personal protective equipment and testing. They questioned whether students could be counted on to wear masks, wash their hands, and maintain social distancing.

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Shemar with his sister and nephew. An expert worried school closures "will decimate the system for those who rely on it."

Photograph by Paolo Morales for The New Yorker

Most strikingly, they argued that reopening schools would be riskiest for the families of precisely those disadvantaged students whom proponents of reopening said they were most concerned about: "the significant numbers of Black and Brown students . . . and their families who unjustly face healthcare

disparities that have made them more likely to be infected and killed by the coronavirus." In Detroit, where protesters tried to halt summer school by blocking school buses and filing a lawsuit, a white progressive activist compared requiring Black children's attendance at school to the Tuskegee Study, in the nineteen-thirties, in which hundreds of Black men with syphilis went deliberately untreated.

Some of the unions' concerns were hard to dispute. The Trump Administration offered little funding for P.P.E. or building upgrades, and Governor Hogan and Superintendent Salmon did not do much more to help. "There was a concerning lack of robust leadership from the superintendent's office," Leslie Margolis, a managing attorney for Disability Rights Maryland, which advocates for people with special needs, told me. "A lot of school systems were looking for guidance." (A spokesperson for Hogan said that his hands-off approach was intentional: "The Governor was one of the most outspoken advocates for ensuring that these decisions were made locally.")

Four days after the unions sent their letter, the *Times* ran an article with an alarming headline: "Older Children Spread the Coronavirus Just as Much as Adults, Large Study Finds." The subheading read "The study of nearly 65,000 people in South Korea suggests that school reopenings will trigger more outbreaks." Contact tracing from more than five thousand COVID-19 cases in South Korea, the piece noted, had found a dramatic difference in how the virus moved among younger and older children. "Children younger than 10 transmit to others much less often than adults do, but the risk is not zero," it stated. "And those between the ages of 10 and 19 can spread the virus at least as well as adults do."

Previously, the debate about reopening had consisted of people offering examples of success and failure in a handful of countries: advocates cited France, Australia, and Sweden, among others; opponents cited Israel, where the hasty reopening of schools, along with a broader ending of lockdowns, had led to a resurgence of cases. But the South Korean findings seemed to be based on a

much larger set of data.

Some researchers immediately found problems with the study's conclusions, pointing out that the sample of children who had become sick was exceedingly small. Also, noted Alasdair Munro, a clinical-research fellow in pediatric infectious diseases at University Hospital Southampton, in the United Kingdom, it was not clear whether older children had passed the virus to adults or had got it at the same time and shown symptoms earlier.

"That study had methodological flaws that several of us pointed out," Allen, the Harvard public-health professor, said. "But the headline took off." Zeynep Tufekci, a sociologist who has become an influential voice on the pandemic response, tweeted, "I personally know parents who changed their whole next year because of the article. . . . The takeaway people got was 10-year-olds can transmit as much as adults."

In July, at the first of a series of weekly online forums, the Baltimore school system updated parents on its plans for the fall. Santelises told the several thousand people listening that the district was still soliciting input and hadn't finalized anything, but she made clear her enthusiasm for having at least some in-person instruction. She told parents that the in-person summer school was going very well—in the end, zero COVID cases were traced to it—and that the ideal was to provide in-person instruction to families who wanted it.

As she was speaking, comments began popping up in the margins of the Facebook Live page that was hosting the forum. "How is this possible? This is a death sentence for these kids." "How many dead students is considered an acceptable risk?" "This is crazy my children are more important y'all are trying to make these babies go back . . . because of Trump."

The direct risks to children were, in fact, blessedly limited. By mid-July, of the roughly thirty-two hundred people known to have died of COVID-19 in Maryland, only one was under the age of nineteen. Nationwide, fewer than a hundred children had died of the virus, roughly comparable to the number of

those who die of the flu, which children are also far more likely to transmit than they are COVID.

But it was not hard to see how parents could have got the impression that children were at great risk. Towns and cities had closed playgrounds, wrapping police tape around them. People in heavily Democratic areas were wearing masks even on empty streets. There may have been an implicitly political dynamic at work: the greater the threat posed by COVID-19, the greater Trump's failure in not containing it. (Joe Biden's campaign aired an ad in early September that read "Our Kids Not Safe in School.") In early July, Anthony Fauci, a trusted guide on coronavirus prevention, told the Washington *Post* that he still left his mail to sit for up to two days before opening it.

Public-health officials who had spent months scaring people into taking proper precautions were now struggling to un-scare them enough to contemplate a return to school. "The messaging never evolved," Jennifer Nuzzo, the Hopkins epidemiologist, told me.

As the school system deliberated, Baltimore, which had seen lower numbers of cases early in the pandemic than many cities on the East Coast, started to see an increase. As elsewhere, the virus was taking a disproportionate toll on Black and Hispanic people, though to a less dramatic degree than in some states.

At another online parent forum, on July 16th, the district released the results of informal surveys it had conducted. Of the more than five thousand parents who responded, forty-seven per cent preferred all-remote learning, forty-one per cent preferred a mix, and twelve per cent preferred all in-person. A survey of faculty and staff found that seventy-two per cent preferred remote instruction, while a quarter preferred a mixture and only three per cent preferred all in-person. "The voices we don't hear are the ones who are shut up at home," Levinson, the education professor, told me. "We have no mechanism to hear from them. There are no polls of six-year-olds."

A few days later, I stopped by Shemar's grandmother's house, where he was

again living. He had barely left the house all summer—he slept late most days, and spent the majority of his waking hours in the living room, the blinds drawn, playing video games. I asked his grandmother what she thought the schools should do and she answered without hesitation: they should reopen. "There's too many kids that need to go to school," she said. "That homeschooling is not going to get it." She went on, "I can't even see, so I can't help him, and most of the time the rest of them are gone. What do you want to do, teach him online? I don't even know how to get online, so I can't be no help to nobody." Shemar, she said, "is not one of those kids who says, 'I've got to do this' and do it. You've got to sit right there with him."

She told me that, as a girl in South Carolina, she often had to stay home from school to watch her younger siblings or help with the crops. She repeated what she often told Shemar: "All I wanted to do when I was your age was go to school, and couldn't."

On July 20th, Santelises held a conference call with reporters to announce that Baltimore's schools would be fully remote, with a reassessment in mid-October. "The fact is, folks, that we are at a time when there is a lot of concern about returning to school generally across the country and across the state," she said. "We heard loud and clear that many staff are just not comfortable."

Other major districts followed—Fairfax County, Virginia (where the district now sends bus drivers on their regular routes twice a week, with empty buses, to keep them on the payroll); Philadelphia; Chicago; Washington, D.C. (where some teachers heaped "body bags"—stuffed black trash bags—outside the headquarters of D.C. public schools, to warn against reopening). By late August, every single county in Maryland had chosen full remote learning, even though the state's test-positivity rate had fallen to near three per cent, two per cent below the World Health Organization's and the Centers for Disease Control's recommended threshold for reopening schools. Across the country, some thirty-five of the fifty largest districts opted for a fully remote opening, as did most large cities, with the notable exception of New York, which announced a hybrid

approach and a delayed start. A study by the Brookings Institution found that districts' school-opening decisions correlated much more strongly with levels of support for Trump in the 2016 election than with local coronavirus case levels. "It almost feels like folly now to speak about data," Nuzzo told me. "The decision was going to be made not on data but on politics."

On August 7th, I met Shemar's fourth-grade teacher, Karen Ngosso, and her two children for a walk in Druid Hill Park, Baltimore's vast green jewel. I had met Ngosso in early 2019: Shemar's mother thought he had gone missing one night, and Ngosso, who hadn't had him as a student for a year, came to help us look for him. (He was fine.)

As we set off, she told me that a cousin of hers, a woman in her early sixties who had diabetes and high blood pressure and had recently completed cancer treatment, had just died from COVID-19 in Missouri. Ngosso's husband had also been infected. The experience left her feeling resentful of others in the neighborhood who seemed not to be taking the threat of the virus seriously.

Ngosso, who is Black, grew up in Kansas City, one of seven children. When she was ten, her mother died in childbirth. As Ngosso recounts it, she and her siblings essentially raised themselves, drawing on what their mother had instilled in them—they even got themselves to church on Sundays. "We'd say, 'Mama wouldn't want us doing this,' " she told me. "Even though Mama was dead, we knew how to handle ourselves, because of things she said to us."

All her siblings now lead successful lives—the eldest retired from the military, one became a nurse, one ran a catering business. Ngosso's upbringing left her with a strong belief in the power of self-reliance, and with little tolerance for what she perceived as the lack of initiative and responsibility on display around her, both in the neighborhood where she lived and in the schools where she taught. "It's this learned helplessness," she told me.

She had moved to a different school last year, Hazelwood Elementary, and she told me that, after schools closed in the spring, of her forty-two third graders,

only fifteen had shown up for online sessions. She had been heartened by how well some of her students took to remote learning—one girl flourished in the role of class moderator, overseeing the online chat box. But many other kids had simply vanished, even after the school distributed laptops and she held special sessions to show parents how to negotiate the Blackboard program.

I had thought that Ngosso would oppose the decision to keep the schools closed, since her insistence on rigor and high expectations for students and families echoed Santelises's. But Ngosso did not trust other families. "When you drive around Baltimore, you see all these grown people walking around, no masks," she said. "Those people's kids will come to school. It's like a snowball effect." She doubted that younger kids could be trusted to keep masks on in class. "Just in general, kids are a snotty, messy mess," she said.

She put little stock in the data showing that the virus had far less effect on children. She noted the subset of children with COVID-19 who had got seriously sick with inflammation of the skin, eyes, blood vessels, and heart, which received a lot of media attention in the late spring. She cited the findings from the South Korean study. (A week after our walk, the *Times* reported that additional data from South Korea was casting doubt on the initial findings.) "They're carriers," she said, referring to children. "They're supercarriers."

She was worried about students like Shemar. "You have kids like him that need some type of stability, which school provides," she said. But she also questioned whether his online education was that different. "The fundamental problem for him isn't if the school is open or not, it's that adults around him are supporting his education," she said. "It doesn't matter if school is virtual or in real life, he's going to have the same issues."

Ryan Hooper, the former soldier, saw it differently. On July 29th, he had published an op-ed in the Baltimore *Sun* saying, "I'm distraught at the thought of our kids in the city missing more school." He told me that he didn't understand why schools couldn't open at least for younger students, who were assumed to pose less of a risk of contagion and who were especially unsuited to

online learning, or for high-needs students, like the ones he worked with, who were in small classes that would be easy to space out. “My biggest concern is that we’re going to lose these kids,” he said. “They might never come back.”

Christopher Morphew, the dean of the Johns Hopkins School of Education, which operates a public school in the city, told me, “The costs of this are going to be huge.” In many homes, children as young as ten were going to be trying to do their online classes while babysitting younger siblings. “The failure to plan now, to spend the money now, is going to cost us in human resources, in violence, in other ways, for a long time,” he said. He estimated that the closure could result in eighteen months of “summer melt,” the term for the educational regression caused by long breaks in schooling. “Eighteen months of summer melt when you’re already three grades behind is virtually impossible to come back from.”

I recently talked with Diamonté Brown, the head of the Baltimore Teachers Union, which is affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers. Brown grew up in Baltimore and attended the University of Michigan before becoming a teacher. She has worked at some of the city’s highest-poverty middle and high schools. Last year, she defeated the incumbent in the union’s presidential election, by appealing to the activist ethos of the burgeoning political left. She told me that the union had been adamant about keeping schools fully remote in the fall, and that she took no encouragement from the fact that summer school had not produced any known infections: “Just because someone didn’t contract COVID doesn’t mean it went great.” She said that secretaries who had recently been sent back into schools hadn’t received adequate P.P.E. The union opposed even allowing teachers to conduct their online courses from their classrooms. “We think they should not go in—we can’t protect them, we don’t have anything that holds the district accountable,” she said. If teachers return to the buildings now, she added, “Why would the district negotiate on anything?”

Brown chided those advocating reopening. As she saw it, they were professing a concern for disadvantaged urban children whom they had previously done little

to support. “When it comes at a time that benefits other people, suddenly those kids become the apple of everyone’s eye,” she said. “I won’t allow people to use my schoolchildren as pawns.”

The young special-education teacher told me that the buildings loomed large in teacher discussions in another way, too. Many of his colleagues, he said, had expressed relief at not having to go back to their schools. With remote learning, “my life is a lot calmer and less stressed,” he told me. “Now we don’t have to suspend anyone or send anyone to the office.”

On Labor Day, the day before school started, I went over to Shemar’s grandmother’s house. His mother was in the dark living room, lying on the couch she and Shemar share as a bed, watching her favorite TV show, “Merlin.” Shemar was at the dining-room table, playing Minecraft on his laptop.

When I had seen him a couple of weeks earlier, he had been startled to learn that he was going into the seventh grade; he had assumed that, because the spring semester had been truncated, he and his classmates would still be in the sixth grade. We went out on the porch with the laptop and made sure he was logged in to Google Classroom, Remind, and Clever, another program his school would be using. According to the Baltimore *Sun*, the district had handed out thirty thousand laptops to students and negotiated to buy as many as twenty thousand Internet hot spots. It had also paid Comcast six hundred and fifty thousand dollars to keep providing Wi-Fi to fourteen thousand children who lacked it.

I asked Shemar and his mother how they felt about the school year starting online. She said that she thought it was for the best, given the risks of COVID-19. Shemar shrugged. “It was annoying,” he said. “School was getting annoying.” The use of the past tense was striking, as if “school” were something that was behind him.

The next day was beautiful, made eerie by the absence of the activity that usually

pervades the first day of school in any city. Shemar's troubles started immediately. His social-studies teacher was absent, which hadn't been announced until the night before, and he hadn't received the Zoom link for the substitute. The teacher for his next class, science, which would start the year with a unit on melting points, had put the Zoom link in Remind, which Shemar didn't have the password for. "How do I log in to my classroom for class?" he wrote me at 10:30 A.M. He got into math class, where they would be catching up on long division with decimals and fractions, but there was no code sent for his first class after lunch, which the schedule said would be Spanish but which was changed at the last minute to library.

By the end of the day, he had logged on to two of his five classes. I started looking into alternatives, such as the "learning centers" that the district was setting up at a handful of schools, with Recreation and Parks staffers supervising while kids did their online classes. Other districts were also offering such in-school supervision, in many cases requiring families to pay extra for sending their kids (raising the question of why the schools were safe for this purpose but not for actual instruction). But the Baltimore learning centers were available only to younger students.

That afternoon, I talked with Weingarten, of the American Federation of Teachers. She asked how the first day of school was going in Baltimore and, when I told her, she offered sympathy for Shemar's difficulties. "There are no good choices right now," she said.

Yet many places had made a different choice. Schools were opening all across Europe, including in towns and cities whose test-positivity rates were well above those in Maryland and many other parts of the U.S. that were keeping schools closed. "Not everything should be destroyed by the health situation," Jean-Michel Blanquer, France's education minister, said. "We must be vigilant, but not forget the educational and social imperatives, nor deviate from our two objectives: improving the educational level of each child and reducing inequalities."

Schools were also opening in roughly half of all districts in the U.S., and so far there was little evidence of the virus spreading inside school buildings. In Connecticut, many small towns and suburbs were offering in-person instruction—but not New Haven, which is heavily Black and Hispanic. In Texas, Florida, and Georgia, where many schools had been open since mid-August, COVID-19 case numbers and hospitalization rates generally continued to decline from their summer highs, despite reported outbreaks at some schools. In Wisconsin, where teachers' unions had been hollowed out by Governor Scott Walker, schools were opening in much of the state (though not in Milwaukee). A middle-school teacher in Sheboygan told me that kids were spending the whole day in the same classroom, and the smell of sanitizer was overpowering. But so far there had been no confirmed cases at the school.

In Baltimore, where the midsummer rise in cases had ebbed, some of the city's élite private schools were already open, while others were preparing to do so. They had hired extra teachers to shrink class sizes, set up tents for outdoor instruction, and installed expensive audio-visual systems in classrooms to allow teachers to simultaneously teach students in class and at home, for additional spacing. Many parents around the country were dubious about young kids sitting through hours of online instruction, and were removing them from the public-school system: in Los Angeles, kindergarten enrollment was down by about fourteen per cent; in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, by seventeen per cent. Jon Hale, a professor of education at the University of Illinois, worried about the flight of middle- and upper-class students. "Anytime they see the system as unstable and they pull out of it, it has a lasting effect," he said. "In this system, the dollars follow the student, and the consequences could be tragic. It will decimate the system for those who rely on it."

There has always been a gulf between public education and private. But the new disparity is stark: in many cities, children in private schools are going to school, and children in public schools are not. (Among such places is Prince Edward County.) A nationwide survey by the education-news network Chalkbeat found that roughly half of white students had the option of in-person instruction,

while only about a quarter of Black and Hispanic students did. After a summer of renewed attention on the disparities facing Black people, millions of Black children would not be getting in-person education.

Weingarten said that this came down to "trust." "If parents and teachers aren't confident that the safety measures are in place, then you're not going to be able to stand it up in the middle of a pandemic," she said. Contending that the virus was more harmful to kids than first realized, she cited the South Korean data—she was not aware of the revision, she said—and then another recent *Times* story on cases rising among kids, which had also been challenged for lacking context and scale. I noted the disagreements with her citations. She replied, "In the absence of trusted information, people have fear right now."

I asked if she worried that there might be a backlash against public education and teachers' unions if opening goes fairly well in private schools and public schools that have opened. "I'm hoping not," she said. Ideally, successful opening in some places—notably the big test case of New York City—would give other districts confidence to follow suit. And, she said, she did not put much stock in predictions that the closures would cause a sustained unravelling of public education. "At the end of the day, kids need to be together in community," she said.

Becky Pringle, the president of the other national teachers' union, the National Education Association, was also confident that parents now leaving the public schools for homeschooling or private schools would return. "Our parents and communities still believe in our schools, that they are a foundation of democracy," she said when we spoke, on the second day of school in Baltimore. "I don't think they're going to abandon schools." I asked Pringle why her union, like others, had put such emphasis on the virus's health risks to children, and she said, "When we look at the data and they say only .1 per cent of kids will contract it and get seriously ill and die, that's actually around fifty thousand children." I noted that the number of children known to have died of COVID-19 nationwide was around a hundred. She said her estimate was what could happen

if kids did go back to school.

As we were talking, my phone buzzed. Shemar hadn't realized that the link for that day's first class, still with a substitute, had arrived at the last minute in the Remind app, so he had missed that period. He then had trouble finding the link for math class. That afternoon, he again lacked a link for a class: physical education, taught remotely. Citywide, about eighty per cent of students had logged on, but only sixty-five per cent were reliably present, according to the district. Before the pandemic, the attendance rate was eighty-seven per cent.

For the foreseeable future, Shemar would be spending his days as he had spent the spring and the summer: in a dark room, in front of a screen, with virtually no direct interaction with kids anywhere close to his own age. Sometimes the screen would hold Minecraft and Fortnite; sometimes, if he got the hang of the log-ins, it would hold Zoom.

Schools in cities such as Baltimore, though deeply imperfect, had long given children a break from such isolation—the key, as the supporters of nineteenth-century charity schools argued, was to get disadvantaged children out of the home and into school, every day. For the time being, in Baltimore and many other American cities, that function was on hold.

I kept thinking of something Karen Ngosso had told me about Shemar. "His story, it could be any number of kids," she said. "There's thousands of him. There's millions of him." ♦

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