

what next

ties, whether that means a school that prioritizes social and emotional development or one with a laser focus on academic achievement. These motivations tend to be in tension with each other, and parents will opt out of schools that try to do more than the one thing that matters to them. With micro-schools allowing families to customize their children's education to an even more fine-grained level, some may conclude that's a better fit.

Second, families and organizations pivoting to support pods are moving quickly to address concerns about equity. Many pods have been formed outside of districts. That has alarmed advocates for low-resourced families. Such families may lack the technology or money to enroll in a private program or hire a teacher.

Some groups and educators are trying to create partnerships to level the playing field. For example, Altitude Learning, formerly AltSchool, was serving 300,000 students in districts before the pandemic. CEO Ben Kornell observed that students on its platform were able to continue to learn relatively seamlessly when its partner districts were forced to go remote. Now the company is seeking to partner with entities like Swing Education to create pods in collaboration with school districts and help pods become more accessible and affordable.

Liability concerns may render these efforts dead on arrival in most districts, but any traction in the public sphere—such as what the Adams 12 Five Star Schools district is doing in

the Denver metropolitan area by supporting pods—could build support for more customized schooling arrangements in the longer run. In a similar vein, taxpayer-funded education savings accounts could also help level the playing field. Six states have such programs, under which parents who withdraw their children from public or charter schools receive some public funds to pay for alternative educational programming. That could increase demand in the longer run, as would efforts like U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos's goal of providing \$5 billion in federal tax credits to help support families opting for homeschool or private schooling arrangements.

Finally, though one of the purported benefits of schools is the custodial care they provide, for many working parents, the coverage is lousy. Childcare that lasts from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. isn't in sync with conventional 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., or longer, office schedules. Any durable changes in our system of education will have to better match a traditional workday. If the pandemic produces more creative options that extend learning and socialization for children while truly meeting parents' needs, there's a better chance that those changes will outlast our eventual return to school.

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school life

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on with the families," Fish said, crediting, "parents that put a strong emphasis on education."

Alpert said that in her era, the students were about 90% Jewish and included many children or grandchildren of immigrants. During the 1930s, because of overcrowding in the high school building, freshman classes met at an "annex" at a nearby Reform synagogue, Temple Ahavath Shalom.

"The parents, the homes that kids came from, education was stressed," Alpert said. "Mostly Jewish parents stressed education, education, education."

What would have happened to these students had they gone to another school is a counterfactual experiment the results of which can't be known. We do know, though, the results of the school with a different student and parent population. That is what happened at the school beginning in the late 1960s, when changes both to New York City overall and to the city's high-school-assignment policies meant, as Alpert put it, "the demographics of the school changed."

So too did the achievement level of the graduates. The school maintains a "wall of distinction" for graduates with noteworthy accomplishments. Honorees in addition to those

already mentioned include the historian Robert Dallek, the television Judge Judy Sheindlin, the test-preparation company founder Stanley Kaplan, and singer-songwriter Carole King. "We are looking for graduates from the 70s, 80s, and 90s. We are looking for them," Alpert said. "I don't know what it is. It dropped off."

The school still has lively extra-curricular activities — the football team won a league championship in 2018, and the mock trial team were state champions in 2010. The city's most recent "school quality snapshot" reports that 82% of students graduated within 4 years,

with 57% of graduates continuing their studies at either two-year or four-year programs offered by the City University of New York. Of 819 seniors in the school, 43 successfully completed an Advanced Placement calculus course, and 31 successfully completed an Advanced Placement government course.

Alpert, the president of the school's alumni association, now lives in the suburbs, but returns to the school often as a volunteer. She stresses that she's proud of the school today, too, even after all the change. She said, "I love these kids, but it's very different."

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How One “Ordinary” Brooklyn High School Produced Six Nobel Laureates, A Supreme Court Justice, and Three Senators

by IRA STOLL

THE DEATH OF JUSTICE RUTH BADER GINSBURG has triggered a resurgence of public interest in James Madison High School, the Brooklyn, N.Y., public school that Ginsburg attended. Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer, another James Madison graduate, held a press conference outside the school to discuss the timeline for confirming a justice to replace Ginsburg.

Graduates of the school include not only Ginsburg and Schumer but also Bernie Sanders, the presidential candidate and senator from Vermont. And even a Republican former senator from Minnesota, Norm Coleman.

At least six Nobel laureates also attended the school: Gary Becker and Robert Solow in economics, Arthur Ashkin and Martin Perl in physics, and Baruch Blumberg and Stanley Cohen in medicine.

The list of luminaries raises the question of whether the accomplishments were the product of something that happened at this public school itself, or whether the individuals would have been equally professionally successful had they gone to school somewhere else. To try to find an answer, I spent some time talking to Madison graduates and reading the high school’s alumni newsletters.

“The questions you are asking are the questions that we all ask each other. I don’t know who really has the answers,” said Judith Naomi Fish, who graduated in 1964 and who has written a series of articles about the school’s history for its alumni newsletter.

The secret doesn’t seem to have been any of the obvious factors. It wasn’t a particularly wealthy group of students, like, say, those who attend Phillips Andover Academy or other private high schools that have produced lots of prominent professionals.

“An ordinary middle- and lower-middle-class high school,” is how a Harvard political scientist, Sidney Verba, another James Madison graduate, described it in a 2011 interview with the Annual Review of Political Science.

It was, Fish said, “just a district school,” not a magnet school and not an exam school that required for entrance a high score on a competitive standardized test.

The key to achievement was not an unusually long school day, either. Martha Weinstein Alpert, who graduated in 1957, recalled that in her era, the school was running in two shifts, with juniors and seniors finished by noon and clearing out to make way for freshmen and sophomores, who went to school in the afternoon.

Nor was the success attributable to the spaciousness of the facilities or to small class sizes. Alpert remembered classrooms so crowded that she sometimes had to share a seat with another student. Other children sat on windowsills or radiators.

There were certainly some excellent teachers. Blumberg, in a video interview, remembered “extremely high academic standards” and noted that the Great Depression had caused some college-level teachers to take high school jobs. “Many of our teachers would have in other times taught at university. Quite a few of them had Ph.D.’s... Our chemistry teacher in high school had a doctoral degree, had done research, was really a wonderful teacher as well,” Blumberg said.

The school’s site in New York City, a cultural capital, also made it easy for the school to attract teachers with second

careers as writers or musicians.

Ambassador Herbert Okun, a career diplomat who graduated from Madison in 1947, recalled in an interview with the school’s alumni newsletter that the faculty “took learning very seriously.” As a prize for doing well in a freshman civics class, the teacher arranged for young Okun to administer the oath of citizenship to “a group of immigrants in the courthouse in downtown Brooklyn.”

Fish and Alpert also emphasized another factor: parents. “There was something very special going (*continued on page 95*)



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