

# Privilege on the Playground

*Some children aren't even free to be children*

By DANIEL BUCK

**I**T WAS A FRIDAY AFTERNOON toward the end of the school year, and the 8th-grade English class I taught had finished their required coursework weeks earlier. So, I took them outside. What could go wrong? In this neighborhood, a lot could and did.

My students spread out across the fenced-in playground. Some huddled under the shaded play structures to talk with friends. Despite the heat, a few chased each other around in their school uniforms. A handful of boys ran football routes in the limited space. I was tense.

Three young teens—a boy and two girls—were walking along the sidewalk across the street. One of my own students beckoned them over. Apparently, not everyone got along. I learned later that the young man was in a rival gang and had insulted other students' deceased relatives on social media. The boys who had been playing football now stood sentinel a few yards back, motionless.

Another of my students encouraged our visitors to move along. The young man shot back, "Who's going to make me?" One of his female acquaintances spit on my student, and pandemonium broke out. Five administrators ran out to the playground as half of my students started climbing the fence while the rest tried to hold their friends back. They knew, as I did, that a fight would probably lead to injuries and even arrests.

Because of the neighborhood my students lived in, they could not be children for even 10 minutes. They couldn't have a few moments of blissful, carefree play that so many others take for granted.

In my years teaching the same grade at an affluent private school, we always spent extra time outside the last week of school. It made my English teacher's heart go pitter-pat to see students rocking on a swing with *Animal Farm* in hand or whispering the passages together in circles at the top of the slide. Always, with a few minutes left, I let them play tag. Soon-to-be high schoolers, they let loose their remaining childishness on the playground.

There are endless comparisons between rich schools and poor schools. Popular Hollywood movies depict urban schools in disrepair: broken desks, moldering ceilings, tattered

textbooks. Students scorn their classwork. Lazy teachers watch YouTube and only intervene if the rowdiness grows to excess.

These portrayals didn't match my experience. My private school had drafty windows. Many students there did the bare minimum to appease their parents. And while the teachers were well meaning, the hard-working ones knew which of their

colleagues were duds. Conversely, my urban school had brand new books, and many of my students had the academic chops to gain admission to an Ivy League school. The teachers in the two schools were similar, the buildings were similar, the students were similar. The context around them made the difference.

One year at the urban school, in the week leading up to Christmas break, I asked one of my students if he was going to skip the last day, as many of his classmates did. He shook his head no. It was out of the question. When I asked why, his response was simple: "My neighborhood is too dangerous. I don't like being home alone."

This 8th grader was six foot one. A stranger might have mistaken him for a recent high school graduate. But he was still a kid, one who was scared to be home alone, and not because imaginary monsters lurked in the dark. The troublemakers he feared posed a real threat.

As a polemicist, I might be expected to end this column with a "So what? What kind of policy will solve this problem? What instructional intervention could counter these realities? What effect does a childhood spent in fight-or-flight mode

do to the human body and psyche?" But I'm struggling.

We ask schools to do so much already. On top of providing basic academic instruction, they serve as community centers, day care providers, athletic trainers, food suppliers, mental health institutions, basic medical facilities, summer camps, and more. Whenever some new societal problem comes along—from single-parent households to childhood obesity—politicians and the rest of us tend to look toward schools, hoping that they'll deal with it.

What's more, we like to blame every societal failure on schools. Why are people rude? Because we don't teach virtues anymore. Why is there so much debt? No one shows kids how

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Daniel Buck

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low-income status, but she told Kahlenberg that “the neighbors are great. . . . They play with my kids perfectly fine.” She loves her kids’ schools.

Unfortunately, only 45 such vouchers were available in Massachusetts in 2021. School reformers should be natural allies with capitalist property owners in unleashing the power of markets to supply more housing at lower cost. Demanding full funding for the Section 8 program that helps needy families pay market rent might feel just, but this is but shouting in the wind, given Washington’s partisan gridlock. Families like Samantha’s need access to duplex and triplex apartments with more-affordable rents. Now.

In 2007 I was witness to an unplanned experiment along these lines. The elementary school serving a public housing complex in a once-redlined neighborhood two miles from my own family’s apartment had declined to the point where its low academic results coincided with dangerous structural failures. The school was shuttered, and its 400 or so students were redistributed to four of the most highly sought-after elementary schools in one of the wealthiest zip codes in the country. And that’s how my son met his friend Richard.

My primary recollection of this centers on what *didn’t* happen. No protests, no comments about students who didn’t “belong.” I met Richard’s mother a few times when the boys played together after school. She worked at the post office. I remember that Richard could mimic the subway-train conductor’s spiel for almost any stop

**Kahlenberg argues that laws constraining the housing supply and excluding low-income families from living in areas with greater opportunity are a major cause of both educational disparities and housing shortages.**

Ohio, which Kahlenberg also profiles, there are opportunities to increase school choice and improve educational outcomes by eliminating or reducing exclusionary zoning. He praises Minneapolis for eliminating single-family zoning but notes that this change was part of a package of reforms, including removing off-street parking requirements and up-zoning transit corridors, that led to the Twin Cities’ housing boom.

Zoning reform alone will not be a silver bullet that fixes American educational dysfunction. Social factors, such as family structure and parents’ prior education, will continue to influence student achievement even as areas of highly concentrated poverty are broken up. But at a time of low social cohesion and few opportunities for bipartisan political effort, freeing property owners to build more housing more easily could furnish another arrow for the reform quiver. Wise planning officials, smart philanthropists, and ambitious mayors would do well to consider Kahlenberg’s latest recommendations.

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*Exclusionary zoning presents a large obstacle to families seeking equity in educational access.*

## SCHOOL LIFE

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to budget and do their taxes. Who caused the disparities in reading achievement? Know-nothing teachers, of course.

Ultimately, though, schools can only accomplish so much. More than 50 years ago, the sociologist James Coleman, in the groundbreaking Coleman Report, came to a simple conclusion: “Schools bring little influence to bear on a child’s achievement that is independent of his background and general social context.” Subsequent work reveals that conclusion to be vastly overstated, but it captures an important truth (see “What Matters for Student Achievement,” *features*, Spring 2016). Family structure, peer influence, classroom disorder,

and other such factors can confound the best laid schemes of mice, men, and education technocrats.

Almost every one of my urban students wanted to graduate from high school, get a good job, and raise a stable family, but so much in their life was working against them. That context shut them off from even this simple privilege of affluence: enjoying a few minutes of carefree play on a playground.

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