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There's Nothing Novel About Our Disdain for Education: Teaching in the Midst of COVID-19

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In June of 2020, former secretary of education Arne Duncan and Rey Saldaña, president and CEO of Communities in Schools, released an op-ed in *USA Today*. Most schools in the United States had let out for the summer, and teachers' and students' collective relief was palpable. Learning during COVID-19, with no prior warnings or timetable to return to normal or adequate resources, was demoralizing.

So when Duncan and Saldaña suggested in their op-ed that, in fact, the learning students had received over the e-learning period was inadequate, and that schools should hold summer sessions to help make up for this failure, and that, by the way, schools shouldn't even have summer breaks to begin with, they were met with the outrage of... no one. That's not because the post wasn't offensive to educators and students alike. One of Duncan and Saldaña's suggestions was that "education can be personalized," as if teachers do not already follow IEPs and 504s and shift their classrooms based on the needs of the students in front of them. But teachers hear non-teachers tell them how to do their jobs all the time. COVID-19 might be a new virus, but there's nothing new about the contempt outsiders have for education.

Duncan and Saldaña state explicitly that we should capitalize on the crisis of COVID-19 to enact "unprecedented change" in public schooling. Their bulleted suggestions to reform public education are, in order: moving to year-long academic calendars, personalizing education, moving students through grades based on

performance instead of age, and providing individual case-management to support students in poverty, specifically students in Title I schools. They also implicitly suggest that segregation is a source of some of the inequity that their suggestions intend to remedy.

Duncan's focus on moving to year-long schooling is not new. He has advocated to reform the academic calendar since his time as the secretary of education (Carr Smyth; Wade). What Duncan called "summer learning loss" in 2014 ("School summer break doesn't work for kids") he and Saldaña are now calling the "COVID slide." But talking about something for a long time doesn't make it real. Duncan and Saldaña have ignored important research about the "summer-slide;" mainly, that we aren't even sure it exists (Kuhfeld; von Hippel). The first data from "The Beginning School Study" (which started the "summer-slide" mania) were collected in 1982; no one cites studies later than "The Beginning School Study" because no one has been able to replicate their findings.

So, while making students sit in classrooms during the summer might seem like a common-sense way to make up for a learning loss that has occurred during COVID-19, the reality is we have no proof of that loss. Data on how students navigate other extended breaks is inconclusive about their effects (Kuhfeld; von Hippel), and we have absolutely no data on how COVID-19 has affected learning. Researchers will need to track the academic achievement of students for multiple years after the

pandemic to see how it has affected the population, and guessing what we think research will conclude is unethical. What we do know, however, is that learning is a lot more complicated than just sharing air and space with a teacher, and more time in school doesn't mean more learning (Baker et al.).

Too much about Duncan and Saldaña's response reflects our flawed beliefs about education, even before COVID-19; it hinges on the premise that being in school magically makes students learn, and that learning is the silver bullet to solving the deep issues of inequity in the United States (Hanauer). Duncan and Saldaña use the questionable data about learning loss during the summer to advocate for year-round schooling and exploit the COVID-19 crisis (and the once again unprovable learning loss from e-learning stints) as a justification, citing "the possibility that the coronavirus will be with us for years to come" to support their political agenda of having students sit in classrooms during summer to perform learning.

It is essential to talk about Duncan and Saldaña's push for a year-long academic calendar in the midst of COVID-19 because that push is rooted in perceiving students of color from a deficit perspective. If learning is about proximity to a teacher, and the majority of teachers in the United States are white ("Characteristics of Public School Teachers"), then the uncomfortable messaging of Duncan and Saldaña is that students of color need to be in proximity to whiteness to address the "COVID slide"; the act of existing in their Black homes, they imply, was inherently damaging. Duncan and Saldaña don't say they are targeting Black students specifically, but they do explicitly align academically struggling students as students of color, calling them "vulnerable children, including poor students and many students of color," and

they also include a link in their post to another op-ed, titled "America's segregated schools: We can't live together until we learn together," implicitly suggesting that the root issue for "vulnerable children" is their segregated home communities and therefore their lack of access to white ways of learning.

Duncan and Saldaña's other suggestions are also damaging and exploitative of students of color. What they call "Competency based teaching...advancing children when they're ready, rather than at the end of an academic year," is really repackaged retention policy, which disproportionately holds Black students back from their next grade (Adams). Because retention is causally linked to increased drop-out rates, there is every reason to believe that if schools followed the policies advocated for by Duncan and Saldaña they would be excessively harmful to students of color by *decreasing* their access to quality schooling (Mariano et al.). Graciously, Duncan and Saldaña advocate to provide one-on-one case management for the very students their other policies fail, saying that at the low cost of "\$5 billion to \$7 billion a year, we could invest in individualized case management for every child in Title 1 school [*sic*] and support their non-academic needs." They characterize \$5 to \$7 billion as "a drop in the bucket." In a fascinating but surely unrelated note, Saldaña is the CEO of Communities in Schools, an organization which provides *individualized case management for students in Title 1 schools*. In her book of the same name, Naomi Klein calls this kind of ploy "the shock doctrine"; "the brutal tactic of using the public's disorientation following a collective shock – wars, coups, terrorist attacks, market crashes or natural disasters – to push through radical pro-corporate measures, often called 'shock therapy.'" Its other name is disaster capitalism.

Duncan and Saldaña stand to benefit politically and financially from their proposed policies, but students will not. Just as importantly, we will continue our American legacy of putting teachers in untenable positions and then blaming them for systemic failures (Goldstein). In all fairness, Duncan and Saldaña mention multiple times the need for federal assistance if their suggestions, which include such costs as summer sessions and IEPs for every student, are to be implemented. But Duncan and Saldaña do not mention using any of those funds to increase teacher pay, even though the increase in worked hours would be substantial; general education teachers are legally required to be present in IEP meetings, which happen at least annually, and while not all year-long academic calendars add days so much as redistribute them, Duncan is on record saying he wants students in school for more days and more hours (“School summer break doesn’t work for kids”). And if this additional (or any) learning is occurring in-person, teachers are also risking their lives. A suggestion that would ease teaching burdens, make social-distancing possible in schools, and disproportionately help minority and at-risk students is smaller class sizes, but Duncan and Saldaña don’t mention that (“Why Class Size Matters Today”).

But I stress again, none of this misguided condescension is new. I have only been in the education field for five years, and criticism from outsiders is circulating constantly in my professional atmosphere, regardless of the types of instruction actually occurring in my (or any) classroom. I will reiterate, teachers have risked their health to provide apparently inadequate instruction. If that was not the case, then there would be no “learning loss” to fix. But providing *any* in-person instruction is above and beyond what we

should expect of teachers, who did not enter the profession with the expectation of being front-line workers during a pandemic.

Rather than making patronizing suggestions, Duncan and Saldaña would have done well to spend more time celebrating the incredible efforts of teachers and addressing how the disparities we see in education are reflective of and linked to inequities in all American systems (Rothstein). And there were laudable efforts. Teachers made videos of direct instruction, crafted entirely new activities for students that would support them even during virtual periods, and hosted tutoring sessions during evening hours. They answered countless emails from students, provided more written feedback on assignments than was ever necessary during a normal schedule, and had more targeted individual and small-group instruction. In my own classes, my students received more one-on-one writing conferencing this semester than at any other point in my career, and the writing these students have produced is the strongest I have yet seen. Teachers change their classes to fit their current situation and students, and they always have. That’s nothing new. And now, we are told that what we did was still not serving students. This too is not new.

Before COVID-19, teachers still had too much to do and too little time and too few resources with which to do it. Teachers participate in professional development, teaching us the “right way” to write learning objectives students never see, or about the newest educational tool that is actually just PowerPoint. I was required by my state to take a graduate course to confirm my “technology proficiency,” despite the fact that it is virtually impossible to have graduated from college in the last 10 years and not have at least the technology proficiency required to pass the course. Teachers have department meetings, or department chair meetings, or district

department chair meetings, or faculty meetings, or professional learning community meetings, and all of it takes time away from both our real instructional goals and from our professionalism, because we are asked to do more than is possible with our paid hours and must then donate our personal time. Nothing is more condescending than devaluing a professional's time, and we didn't wait for a pandemic to start doing that to teachers. The strains educators are facing during COVID-19 then are only different from the strains of being a teacher in the United States, but not worse.

And of course, there's also nothing new about the public's response to COVID-19 and education: letting non-educators with power posit reforms without evidence, writing policies that disenfranchise the very students we paternalistically pretend to protect, fantasizing that education can equalize the inequities our students face outside the classroom, expecting magical results in underfunded classrooms, and requiring teachers to de-professionalize themselves by consistently putting their students before their own health and family's needs (Hanauer; "TCF Study Finds U.S. Schools Underfunded by Nearly \$150 Billion Annually;" Reilly). We have always expected martyrs of teachers, and we have always expected miracles of teachers. But circumstances in education, before *and* during COVID-19, have always been untenable. The novel reality of COVID-19, the one Arne Duncan and Rey Saldaña say should cause radical change to our education system, is that there's nothing novel about it at all.

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