

## #85 Pandemic: School Closures Past and Present

**Jennifer Berkshire** Welcome to Have You Heard, I'm Jennifer Berkshire. And while it may sound like we are in the studio, same as always, we are not. We are respecting all of the protocols and we are recording our first ever Have You Heard episode in this time of pandemic from a distance.

**Jack Schneider** We are social distancing and we have doubled the number of studios in use right now.

**Berkshire** Well Jack, what is so amazing about this moment of crisis is that it's really also all about the schools. And so when I turn to those newspaper columns that answer questions, you know, how long does the virus live on a hard surface? How much toilet paper should I really buy? I have all sorts of other unanswered questions for an education historian.

**Schneider** Well you are lucky Jennifer, that you happen to be social distancing over the internet with somebody who has answers to those questions.

**Berkshire** Well, let me put my first question to you. The first thing I want to know that I really have not seen addressed in a particularly satisfying way is just how unprecedented these mass school closures have. And obviously in the past there were all sorts of epidemics. My grandmother had to be quarantined for smallpox. Have we seen anything like this on this scale before?

**Schneider** It turns out that we have, and it's actually hard to say how many times and, you know, how disruptive these kinds of closures have been. There were people on the internet today who were talking about how disruptive it must have been for American schools when the American revolution broke out. So I can imagine that, were there data available, we could have a robust conversation about 18th century school disruptions.

We have better records from the 20th century though. And the pandemic that really kicked off 20th century pandemics was the so-called Spanish flu, which emerged in 1917 and spread among troops during world war one and basically followed them home. And if you read through archival newspapers, you can actually follow Spanish flu across, uh, you know, the continent of Africa across North America as these troops are headed home from war.

So I mentioned Africa, there were troops headed back to South Africa and I found an archival document from South Africa saying the education of almost all children at school in 1918 was seriously disrupted for nearly every school in the country closed for periods ranging from a few weeks to the whole fourth quarter in these closures. There was no uniformity for the decision to open or close schools on medical grounds initially lay with each school board or local authority.

And that turns out to also have been the case in North America. So we see school closures across Canada as well as across the United States in Buffalo, New York. I found a document that said never before had it become necessary to close schools, churches, theaters, saloons. In fact, everything except factories, offices and places of regular employment, hotels, restaurants, stores in which food and clothing are sold. That by the way, seems like a lot of places that remained open. Public funerals and all indoor meetings of more than 10 people were prohibited. The mayor's proclamation was so drastic that virtually everything in the line of business or public gatherings, even including outdoor assemblies and parades were prohibited except by special permit of the acting health commissioner. We see this in places like North Dakota in Philadelphia. So really it was all over the place, uh, in 1918 and sent millions of kids home from school.

**Berkshire** And we're still only in 1918 can you imagine how long it's going to take us to get up to the present. So Jack, whisk us through some of the big epidemics of the 20th century and how they impacted schools.

**Schneider** The next outbreaks were generally all polio outbreaks. There were several in the 1930s as well as the forties and 50s, and then there was a big wave of polio outbreaks in 1955. And one of the things that's striking about polio is that even though it affects adults, it is far more likely to strike children. And so many people kept their kids home from school and placed pressure on public officials to close schools for fear that their children would contact polio viruses in school. That turned out to be a very different kind of approach to managing a pandemic than something like a pandemic flu where really the idea was not necessarily just to protect children. But to keep children from bringing those flu viruses home and spreading them among their families.

**Berkshire** Well, Jack, I think I speak for the entire, Have You Heard listening audience when I say thank you for bringing yourself and us up to speed. That, and I can only imagine how exciting it must be to be your daughter who you're now homeschooling, that she's learning all of these fun facts as well.

**Schneider** Well, now she really believes that I am a doctor, Jennifer.

**Berkshire** So one of the other really amazing things about this story unfolding is that suddenly there's this acknowledgement that schools actually do way more than what we've come to think of in the past couple of decades. A few weeks ago when the scope of the closures around the world was, was really starting to become evident. There was this amazing quote in the New York times about how that, you know, kids don't just go to school to learn, but that schools really provide the economic underpinning for whole communities there, the cultural and social glue. And I thought, wow, you know, we have, we really haven't seen any acknowledgement like that that I can remember. I'm working on a project about how the Obama administration almost always talked about schools in economic terms as places where people go to develop their human capital. And I cannot find references from the administration that really go beyond that.

**Schneider** One of the things that I think people are really beginning to realize is how much we depend on schools as childcare facilities. Um, I think this will be a very interesting challenge for those who are seeking to dismantle brick and mortar schools and move children online. This will be a challenge because in the collective consciousness will reside the memory of closing schools in the spring of 2020. And how it really brought the economy to a standstill because so many people were unable to go to work or do their jobs as they normally do. Schools of course do far more than babysit our children. But that is a traditional role and continues to be one. But as you're alluding to, Jennifer, schools do a whole lot more than that. Um, for many children, school is the place where they feel safest. School is a place where they are warm in the winter and cool in the warmer months.

School is a place where they can get two meals a day. So in 1946, the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act was signed into law. But of course, even prior to that federal legislation, schools had been feeding children lunches and particularly in urban areas, there had been efforts to provide either free or low cost meals for students. And then in 1966, the Child Nutrition Act made free breakfast available to students.

So many students can count on 10 square meals a week from school. And even those schools are in many cases promising to continue delivering those meals during this shutdown. For many children, it's either hard to get to school, or their parents are not prioritizing taking them there, or you know, they just simply don't have the information about what's happening. So everything from school lunches to the kinds of medical services that are delivered in schools—a dental clinic sets up shop once a year in my daughter's school to deliver a free dental services to kids there. So we've really seen the educationalization of our social and economic problems over the past century and our treatments are delivered both in the form of schooling and in the location of schools.

**Berkshire** Well, I'm so glad you mentioned that because we actually did an interview and by we, I mean I a few years ago with historian Harvey Kantor on just that topic. He refers to it as the welfareization of education. So a little bit different from how you described it, but we've been hearing again and again that some 22 million students rely on schools for, you know, a huge part of their nutrition. And I've mentioned this a couple of times on Twitter. This is not the case in other countries, right? This is a unique thing that we have in the United States where our schools are the primary social welfare system. And so we have this very weird kind of bifurcation where on the one hand, the welfare system only exists in so far as it's run through the schools. But on the other hand, we put all of our trust and emphasis on schools as the vehicle that's going to lift kids out of poverty. So it's this kind of crazy combination and I'm really wondering if either of those is going to survive this pandemic.

**Schneider** Yeah, that's definitely something that we will have to take up in the safe space of the In the Weeds segment of the show. But you know, I think one thing worth pointing out is that it's actually been a long fight for many advocates of children and particularly for the most vulnerable

children in our society to get those services into schools because there has been so much resistance to providing those kinds of services outside of schools. You know, our particular American approach to education idea that schools are the great leveler, that schools are the meritocratic grounds wherein students come from different walks of life and can be made more equal so that they can compete against each other and come out fairly unequal, right? So they will, they will come out unequal, but in a way that we look at as being a kind of acceptable inequality.

This means that we're particularly likely to favor the kinds of redistributive policies in our schools that we're often uncomfortable with outside of our schools in the United States. And so this sort of the problematic approach to meritocracy and the role that schools play there as the central meritocratic sorter does mean that if you want to deliver services to young people, that generally speaking you're going to have your best shot at doing it inside schools.

**Berkshire** I mentioned that I've been doing some research and reading into the Obama administration. While I'm a self-quarantined or sheltering in place, I'm doing a lot of reading. I don't know why I always read the grimmest things... But one thing that really stands out to me is that you can just see the stark limits of so much of the understanding that's animated education reform over the past couple of decades. And you see this in all kinds of ways. You see it when you know, for example, suddenly all those things that were just sort of dismissed as out-of-school factors or you know, quote unquote excuses, you see what that actually looks like, right? You see the difference between, families that are all in on homeschooling their kids and families that are just are going to be going through an unbelievable struggle just to get by.

And then you also see what it means to have all this influence, all this emphasis on autonomy at the city level, right? That you have these cities that have broken up their school districts, and the whole idea is that individual schools and their school leaders are best positioned to make decisions and suddenly, you know, like, well they're not really able to feed students in the same way, right? So what does that mean that you've walked away from the system that your autonomous schools are competing with the system, but when it comes time to provide nutrition to kids in say New Orleans or Washington DC the schools are autonomous actors?

**Schneider** I think what you're pushing on there, Jennifer, is the flaw in the theory of change here. That competition is the solution to the problems that students face outside of schools that they bring with them to the schoolhouse store. And that then complicates the work of schooling. We know that we live in an unequal society with a troubling racial history and that none of that is left outside of schools. It impacts the work of teachers and students inside schools. And it means that we need to develop a set of fairly complex policy responses to try to address the very different needs of each young person. But putting schools in competition against one another is not going to do that. Right. It may turn the heat up just a bit underneath educators who already feel the heat to do right by their children, by the children inside schools. But it certainly isn't going to make the problems that they face in educating young people go away.

Well, I'm guessing that you are just as much in need of a pick up right now as we are and so we have a somewhat extended version of 60 seconds of sunshine for you. When a friend of mine who teaches in a neighboring town told me about a juggling club she started for her students I was intrigued. So bright and early on one of the last days that school was in session I headed up to Rockport Elementary School. Here's kindergarten teacher Erin Caniff and I asked her to describe the scene that was unfolding all around us.

**Berkshire** So Jack, you mentioned that your daughter now has the impression that you are a doctor and not just a doctor of education history, but a doctor of actual like medicine and you know about things like germs. So I was curious when I read about school closings, there does seem to be this debate about whether, you know, have people overreacted and it seems like there are legitimate questions and I just wondered what you come across in your self guided study.

**Schneider** Jennifer, if you would please rephrase that question, address it to Dr. Schneider and drop the snark, then I'd be happy to respond to it. You know, there is great fear that people have overreacted, that policy leaders, in conversation with medical professionals have jumped the gun here and have closed schools too early and too broadly. I was reading a commentary by a medical professional saying that, you know, hitting the sweet spot where you've closed schools soon enough that you have actually saved lives, but you haven't closed them so early that you've merely inconvenienced people. That is almost impossible. But I did a little digging in the medical literature and it seems like closing schools is a very important tool in the arsenal and that if it's done early enough and broadly enough, then what it does is it essentially flattens the curve on infections where ultimately 90% of people who would have been infected had we not closed schools will be infected eventually, but the peak of infections will be much smaller.

So essentially the rate of infection will be lowered during that peak period when hospitals might be overrun. And when you would really see a kind of devastating loss of life due to medical facilities being overrun, it really just spreads out to the infection because schools as hubs in our social networks turn out to be really great places to share bacteria and viruses and also other things, great things like ideas. But if you close the schools early enough, the virus will eventually work its way through most of a society. It will just do so at a much slower and steadier rate rather than really peaking quickly and overwhelming the medical system.

**Berkshire** Well, Jack, I often compliment us on our ability to bring people down and by us, I mean you and I feel like this time you've done a particularly effective job and that means that we need a little pick me up. Do you know what time it is?

**Schneider** If I didn't know what time it was, Jennifer, I wouldn't be a doctor.

**Berkshire** Well, I'm guessing that you are in just as much need of a pick me up right now as we are, and so we have a somewhat extended version of 60 Seconds of Sunshine for you. When a friend of mine who teaches in a neighboring town told me about a juggling club she started for

her students, I was intrigued. So bright and early on one of the last days that school was in session I headed up to Rockport Elementary School to check out the juggling club for myself. I asked kindergarten teacher Erin Caniff to describe the scene.

**Erin Caniff** This morning the kids come in at eight o'clock or shortly thereafter and they just start practicing their juggling. Usually they have a goal that they're setting for the day, an intention and they're just going to practice until about 20 past eight. And then at 20 past eight gym, we'll open up the testing circle where they can try to get to the next level of juggling.

**Berkshire** This is a club that's open to anyone and as Erin explains some of the kids who've fallen in love with juggling are students who've struggled in school.

**Caniff** The great thing about Juggling Club is that the kids that are at a higher level actually teach the younger kids. So we have, you know, we have about 15 teachers in the room, most of them students, and the students actually can juggle much better than the adults.

**Berkshire** Now I'm sure you're wondering - what about you Jennifer? How are your juggling skills? Well, I started the way that all jugglers do here - with a couple of silk scarves. And some more advanced students were eager to help me out. Jack was one of them. He says that he and other students who've moved onto tossing rings and pins keep any eye out for beginning jugglers like me.

**Jack** We just kind of like, we would kind of come over to you and we would like say like what's the matter? :ike we would ask you like how we can help and then we would just start like helping you with a lot of stuff like we would, say you're on scarves and you're having trouble with crisscross or just like crossing them. We would help you with like form or technique or like anything that could just help really.

**Cecilia** My name is Cecilia and kind of like what Jack said, but if you're having trouble we try to, we ask you what you need help with and then we help you with stuff that kind of fits in with it so that the whole thing can be better.

**Berkshire** One of the big lessons that these aspiring jugglers learn right away is that it's OK to drop things. Asher started juggling in second grade, he's now 11.

**Asher** The whole thing with juggling that I learned over like at first you don't want to drop it all, but after you get to know how to do it, dropping is like the best thing you can do to juggle cause that gives you like a foundation. So before I would get mad when I dropped and I wouldn't, I like stopped for a little bit, but now I'm just like used it to. I first figure out what I did wrong and then I like move on from that and try to fix it.

**Berkshire** By now you're getting the idea that this is about more than just throwing stuff in the air. Jim Goodstat was a principal in Gloucester down the road where I live and a parent told him

about a program called Juggling for Success. Jim invited them in, he started a club and he helped get the one in Rockport off the ground.

**Goodstat** I think there's a lot of value in it. I mean the juggling is great, it's fun, but it also teaches, we talk about perseverance, patience and practice, which you can use any place in your life. It talks about, you know, goal setting and having a goal. So they're testing now for certain, they are in a lot of different levels that they can achieve and they stay with it. And the other thing I love is that they support each other. It's very non competitive. So they're supporting each other and sometimes when somebody's testing the gym we'll go quiet and they'll be...so she's trying for her master pins, which is, she's been trying all year and part of last year she's in fifth grade and hopefully she's very close. That's the high, there's only one other person that has gotten it, which is Cecilia has gotten master pins. And then they do trick juggling and we have our Juggernauts performance team that meets also on Thursdays.

**Berkshire** And in case you're wondering I was not invited to join the ranks of the Juggernauts. But I made a lot of new friends. Ready everybody?

**Rockport Jugglers** We're the Rockport Jugglers and this is our 60 Seconds of Sunshine.

**Berkshire** Thanks to Erin Canniff and everyone who is part of the Rockport Elementary School Juggling Club. Hopefully you'll be back in the gym soon. And just a reminder that if you have an idea for something that would make a great 60 seconds of sunshine, drop us a line. You'll find everything you need to know at [HaveYouHeardBlog.com/sunshine](http://HaveYouHeardBlog.com/sunshine). So Jack, do you feel a little bit cheerier after hearing about my attempt to conquer juggling?

**Schneider** Jennifer, I look forward to your further pursuits in all of the circus arts.

**Berkshire** Well, that's enough of the good cheer. Now, back to the bad news. As our regular listeners know, this podcast is supported by you. Your generous contributions enable us to keep it going. It's how we pay our fantastic producer and we do that through Patreon. If you go to [Patreon.com/HaveYouHeardPodcast](http://Patreon.com/HaveYouHeardPodcast), you will find all the cool little extras you get like a reading list. And this one is going to be dense with historical information about school closures, about epidemiology. Jack's going to get it right on that when we're done with this, and all you need, if you chip in a couple of dollars a month, that keeps us going. Of course, that's not the only way that you can support the program.

**Schneider** Yes, Jennifer, you're learning. There are other ways that people can support the show. As our regular listeners know, the best way to support the show is by telling people about us. Uh, we don't have Ira Glass' marketing muscle behind us. We spread by word of mouth. And so if you let your friends and colleagues, your coworkers and your loved ones know that you're listening to the show and maybe send them your favorite episode, that's one helpful way to help us grow. You can also engage with us online. The show's got a Twitter handle: @HaveYouHeard Pod and we've had some great ideas for episodes from listeners and we also just like hearing that you're enjoying the show

**Berkshire** And if you do chip in, then you get to accompany us to an exclusive area that we like to call In the Weeds. It's where Jack and I hold forth in an unscripted way on some topic that consumes us. And right now that topic is: do we need to worry about schools ever reopening, particularly in states where there have been feverish efforts underway to dismantle the schools? That's what I'm thinking about a lot. How about you Jack?

**Schneider** I'm still stuck on you saying that we hold forth in an unscripted way as if we are both sitting in front of elaborately prepared scripts for the main part of our episodes. Yes, well I'm not worried. I haven't been indulging my paranoid fantasies like you have that schools will never reopen. But I have been spending a lot of time thinking about the fact that this really is the dream that many of those who seek to dismantle the public education system have for the future of the system that brick and mortar schools, which are expensive to operate, would be shuttered. That we would do away most of the expense of public education by getting rid of most of the 3.5 million teachers who are out there. That this could be their moment right now.

**Berkshire** If this is something that you want to know more about, just head to [Patreon.com](https://www.patreon.com/HaveYouHeardPod) and search for Have You Heard pod. Otherwise we'll see you next time. I'm Jennifer Berkshire.

**Schneider** And I'm Jack Schneider.