

THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

*"The object of the Monitor is to injure no man,
but to bless all mankind."*

— MARY BAKER EDDY

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CONTENTS

FROM THE EDITORS

The real lessons of 'back to school'1

NEWS: DISPATCHES

A nuclear power race may be underway in the Middle East .1

College graduates face a global squeeze on entry-level jobs .2

After inquiry, AI immigration tool disappears2

In India, 'Cockroach' protests dent Modi's strongman image .3

Brazil's Lula launches reelection bid despite foreign pressure3

NUMBERS IN THE NEWS4

OUR WORLD4

BACK TO SCHOOL5

After the college left, a town reimagines learning5

Parents push for less YouTube, more books in schools6

Education's AI 'gold rush' comes with risks7

'Don't just believe. Look.'9

Even in Massachusetts, schools face segregation10

New cohorts of Americans find passport to study abroad. .11

REPORTERS ON THE JOB.12

KIDS' SPACE13

The class menagerie13

POETRY.14

BACK TO SCHOOL: THE HOME FORUM

Dear Pen Pal, how far is South Africa from Mexico?14

LENS AND LIGHT16

A CHRISTIAN SCIENCE PERSPECTIVE16

EDITORIALS

Parents in prison: Sustaining family bonds16

Finding liberty behind bars in China17

CULTURE

In an age of hybrid work, an old road gets a new twist . . .17

BOOKS

The 1909 auto race that sealed Americans' love of cars . . .19

IN PICTURES

After a long war, Syrians scale new heights.19

SUDOKU20

CROSSWORD21

The real lessons of ‘back to school’

There was a short chapter in my life when I was not concerned with going back to school. It was post-college, pre-children, and I remember the smugness of planning a vacation for early October.

For what felt like forever, my late summers had revolved around No. 2 pencils and class lists and the prickly anticipation sparked by names like Western civilization or Biology 2. But then, the months sprawled like a teenager in a hammock. And I won't lie: The break was nice.

After a while, though, I realized a bit of me was ready for “back to school” again. This was before I had kids of my own, before they hoisted pint-size backpacks and picked out special polka-dot leggings to wear for the first day. I just realized I missed September's sense of potential – not in that self-focused way of many New Year's resolutions, but as an expansive sort of longing for new things to learn and new relationships to forge.



By Stephanie Hanes
Print Editor

That's where this special issue comes in. If you've experienced any of this – whether you are returning to school yourself or whether it's been decades since you thought about meeting a new teacher – this magazine is for you. Throughout these pages, our stories tackle some of the most-debated topics in education today, from artificial intelligence to college finances. They also delve into the connections

we make in the classroom, whether interspecies or international.

Be sure to check out our special Kids' Space – we designed it so you can pass it to the younger children in your life.

In a lot of ways, the modern education system is an odd experiment. We take children away from their families, group them by age, and attempt to teach them a set of facts we think they all should know, from geometry to Shakespeare. So, it's not surprising, perhaps, that the real lessons are not always about coursework.

We asked children and teens at Camps Newfound & Owanne in Maine for their best tips for Day 1 at school. You'll find many of them sprinkled on the pages throughout this magazine, but here's a sample:

“Talk to people who look like they need a friend. Don't do things just because other people do it.”

“Don't try to take it in all at once. Also, don't worry so much.”

“Don't stress over grades – they won't matter in the end (but still try). Don't miss out on experiences.”

This, I realized, is what I had missed most about back to school. And it's this sense of humanity, alongside learning, that we hope you continue to find in our magazine. ■

A nuclear power race may be underway in the Middle East

When Turkey and Egypt began building nuclear power plants with Russian technology over the past decade, the United States asked both countries to commit to never enriching uranium to fuel a nuclear weapon.

Both refused.

Now, in the wake of the U.S.-Saudi nuclear deal announced July 22, which leaves the door open to Saudi Arabia's eventual weapons-grade enrichment of uranium, both Turkey and Egypt are likely blessing the day they said “no” to Washington.

A nuclear power race appears to be underway in the Middle East, and many countries are keeping a close eye on what their neighbors in the region are doing, nervous that others might develop nuclear weapons before them.

Experts say the proliferation of nuclear-power projects in the Middle East is just one piece of evidence of a global shift in perceptions of the technology. In an era of galloping energy demands – coinciding with the rising impact of global warming – more countries are seeking to add nuclear power to their energy sources.

But much more worrisome, they add, is an accompanying shift in thinking on the development of nuclear weapons and the eventual need to join the club of nuclear-armed states in a world of mounting instability, fading traditional security alliances, and a retrenching Pax Americana.

“I don't think we're going to see any country moving immediately in response to [the U.S.-Saudi] deal to abandon their international obligations and make a dash for the bomb,” says Kelsey Davenport, director for nonproliferation policy at the Arms Control Association in Washington. “But I do think more states are going to move to hedge their bets and take the steps they sense may now be necessary to respond to the security threats they perceive they increasingly face.”

In the Middle East, but also in northeastern Asia and even Europe, the tandem pressures of rising instability and a retreating American superpower – for many the longtime security guarantor – are prompting countries to question the durability of the U.S. nuclear umbrella and the need to consider other nuclear options, analysts say.

It's a scenario that could put more countries, including those in the world's most volatile regions, on the path to obtaining nuclear weapons. “For long-term nonproliferation prospects,” Ms. Davenport adds, “this is not looking good.”

– Howard LaFranchi / Staff writer

College graduates face a global squeeze on entry-level jobs

From Europe and Asia to Canada and the United States, young workers in many developed countries are struggling mightily to get hired. In the U.S., recent college graduates – ages 22 to 27 – have traditionally seen lower unemployment than the national average. By 2019, that began to change and, by this past March, joblessness for this group stood at 5.6%, compared with 4.2% for all workers, according to national data aggregated by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York.

Many global corporations have adopted a low-fire, low-hire approach to personnel. Some are trying to use artificial intelligence to replace entry-level jobs as a first step in white-collar automation. Meanwhile, many young people lack the experience, skills, or even AI know-how that employers crave.

“Young university graduates are ... at an increasingly high risk of unemployment compared to other workers,” concluded an Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development report on joblessness in July.

In the United Kingdom, for example, the unemployment rate for young workers rose to 16.4% this spring, up from 14.2% a year ago. A record number of young men – more than 1 in 3 – live at home with their parents because of unemployment and an expensive housing market. For the first time in more than a decade, 1 million people ages 16 to 24 are neither employed, in school, nor receiving training.

Jobs that college students might normally work are disappearing, says job seeker Jack Fearnley-Whittingstall in London. Roughly 930 pubs closed in London between 2004 and 2024, and hundreds of hospitality businesses, including cafés and restaurants, closed near the end of 2025.

In Japan, where demographic decline means fewer people in the workforce, the biggest challenge isn’t unemployment. (For those ages 15 to 24 years old, it stands at 4.5% – almost twice the overall jobless rate.) It’s underemployment, especially for women and young people.

Many young people are pursuing a career path instead of just going after a “good job” at a big company, says Sato Yuto, a graduate student, musician, and poet in Tokyo, who specializes in Japan’s 31-syllable verse, known as tanka. More young people these days “identify what they love to do,” he says, and try to find work in that field.

There are signs the picture might be brightening, at least in the U.S.

Some big companies, including Booz Allen Hamilton and Alphabet (the parent company of Google), have announced plans to step up hiring. Others, such as railroad company CSX, Ford, and IBM, are reconsidering their strategies for entry-level jobs.

“It is promising,” says Andrea Koncz, senior research manager for the National Association of Colleges and Employers. After two years of mostly lackluster hiring expectations, NACE’s latest survey of 185 companies found that employers expected to hire 5.6% more new college graduates than last year.

Even a modest hiring increase in entry- and junior-level positions would be welcome, as slow economies around the world have been especially hard on workers in their early 20s.

In many ways, unemployment and underemployment among young people are age-old problems. Because these workers often

have little to no experience, when economic conditions tighten, companies often first cut entry-level jobs, the very positions that young people can compete for.

Additionally, there are now concerns about AI’s impact, and it runs deep, not just for the jobs AI might take away but also for its influence in the hiring process.

“The job market is terrible for this graduating class of students, and I think a big part of that is because of AI,” says one new graduate of Colgate University who declined to give her name for privacy reasons. “It’s very hard to differentiate yourself if you’re just submitting that résumé, because a lot of companies now use a form of artificial intelligence to really quickly screen the résumés. ... Even if you’re a qualified applicant, you can easily fall through the cracks.”

– Laurent Belsie / Staff writer

Currie Engel and Takehiko Kambayashi / Contributors

After inquiry, AI immigration tool disappears

The Trump administration appears to have deleted evidence of an artificial intelligence tool it said could have a significant impact on individual rights from a government inventory, following an inquiry about the product by the Monitor.

The AI tool, one of two bearing the “high-impact” designation by the Department of Health and Human Services, was being developed to vet sponsors of unaccompanied immigrant children who end up in government custody. Congress requires agencies to publish detailed information about AI tools online.

A description of the product, removed in July from the department’s website, classified the AI tool as “computer vision.” Computer vision is a field of AI in which machines interpret large amounts of digital images and videos to reach conclusions. Common computer-vision techniques include facial-recognition software, license plate readers, and tools used to process surveillance footage captured by drones.

As of this writing, it is unclear whether a contract was ever awarded or whether this AI tool had been deployed. HHS has not responded to repeated attempts to get answers to those questions.

The Monitor asked a public affairs office at HHS about the AI tool’s status and vendor after seeing it listed in the agency’s online inventory on July 10.

The agency never responded to that inquiry, either. Ten days later, the Monitor noticed evidence that the AI product had disappeared.

Keeping a public registry of the government’s “current and planned uses” of AI – known as an AI use case inventory – is mandated by Congress.

Legal experts, including former agency officials, say the removal of information about the AI tool was potentially illegal and raises troubling questions about the Trump administration’s commitment to the safety of immigrant children.

Deirdre Mulligan, a faculty director at the Center for Law & Technology at the University of California, Berkeley, adds: “When a reporter asks about something and it’s removed – that’s problematic.”

Under President Donald Trump, the Office of Management and Budget issued guidance last year requiring agencies to “inventory all AI use cases in pre-deployment, pilot, deployed, or retired.” AI products must not be deleted even when their “development and/

or use has since been discontinued” to preserve a record of the government’s action, at least for the following year, the OMB said.

The OMB declined to comment for this story, referring the Monitor to HHS.

Before it disappeared, the online description of the “Unaccompanied Child Sponsor Identity Verification” AI tool was minimal.

With little information on the AI tool, immigrant rights advocates worry data from AI-enhanced vetting could be shared with other agencies to help the Trump administration meet its deportation goals, potentially depriving children of their best caregivers.

In a whole-of-government crackdown, HHS has partnered with Immigration and Customs Enforcement, as well as other federal and local agencies, to check on children and sponsors nationwide. Along with other application steps, the Trump administration has required fingerprinting of those adults. HHS has shared leads with ICE, leading to the arrest of thousands of individuals, Reuters reported July 28.

As scrutiny of those adults ramps up, HHS in recent months has held unaccompanied minors in custody longer – more than half a year on average.

Advocates for unaccompanied children are wary of potential data sharing with the Department of Homeland Security for immigration enforcement against sponsors, rather than “making good decisions about if a home is safe for a child,” says Jennifer Podkul, chief of global policy and advocacy at Kids in Need of Defense. Losing a viable sponsor could mean a child stays in government custody longer, she says.

Under President Trump, DHS has developed, deployed, or piloted at least 51 “computer vision” tools. This includes more than a dozen that utilize facial recognition, among them Mobile Fortify, which immigration and border agents have used to scan people’s faces in the field and make arrests.

– Sarah Matussek and Aaron Glantz / Staff writers

In India, ‘Cockroach’ protests dent Modi’s strongman image

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has spent 12 years in office cultivating an image as a leader who does not bend to pressure. His government was steadfast in the face of multiple protests, quick to curb dissent, and, unlike its predecessors, did not ax ministers in times of crisis. Until now.

In recent months, a youth movement known as the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) demanded Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan’s resignation over a string of exam paper leaks that affected millions of students across the country. Tens of thousands of young Indians rallied in the heart of New Delhi. They marched on Parliament. Some were arrested. And after weeks of resistance, the government blinked.

The Cockroach movement – named in the wake of a disparaging comment India’s chief justice made about unemployed youth – is now taking a breather, preparing, its leaders say, to throw its weight behind other issues affecting young Indians. But last month’s win, which marks the first real dent in Mr. Modi’s strongman image, is already shaping how opposition politicians, activists, and even members of Mr. Modi’s own Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) perceive the government’s vulnerability. Many say the movement has cracked

open new space for dissent.

“For years, Indian politics had settled into an air of pessimism and defeatism, with [opposition] parties fractured and demoralized,” says Apoorvanand, an expert in Indian political movements and Hindi professor at the University of Delhi.

The Modi government’s aversion to resignations has deep roots. In 2015, as opposition leaders demanded cabinet resignations over two separate political scandals, a senior minister drew a line between the new, BJP-led government and the coalition that governed India before Mr. Modi.

“Ministers don’t resign here,” said then-Home Affairs Minister Rajnath Singh, in a clip that has circulated broadly since Mr. Pradhan’s exit.

“This government had turned into a kind of monarchical government, one in which the basic democratic idea that power answers to the people had disappeared,” he says. Under Mr. Modi, India has seen “fatal train accidents, chaotic pandemic management, a disruptive currency overhaul, [but] nobody took responsibility. It was as if everything was happening with divine order.”

Mr. Modi’s government has faced large protests before, including the 2020-21 farmers’ protests, which forced a rare repeal of agricultural laws. But these movements were typically rooted in a specific constituency, making them easier for New Delhi to contain and discredit. The CJP rapidly mobilized a broader base by tapping into frustration over repeated exam scandals – a problem which touches virtually every Indian family.

“Education binds all, cutting across social barriers, income barriers, everything,” says Apoorvanand. And CJP organizers say it’s only the beginning.

Since Mr. Pradhan’s resignation, movement leaders have said they are “resting and regrouping.”

But analysts say next year’s election in Uttar Pradesh, India’s most populous state and the BJP’s political heartland, will offer the first real measure of whether the Cockroach movement has lasting electoral consequences.

Even if Mr. Modi’s party wins, a narrower victory margin – what Michael Kugelman, senior fellow for South Asia at the Atlantic Council, calls the “Cockroach factor” – would suggest that this organic, youth movement has succeeded in reshaping India’s political landscape.

– Aakash Hassan / Contributor

Brazil’s Lula launches reelection bid despite foreign pressure

The seventh presidential campaign for Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva was confirmed on Aug. 2 by his Workers’ Party, though the leader faces growing pressure from foreign leaders ahead of October’s elections. Lula’s rival, Sen. Flávio Bolsonaro, is leaning on open support from Argentina’s President Javier Milei, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and political factions aligned with U.S. President Donald Trump.

“This election in Brazil determines the future of Latin America,” Edinho Silva, the Workers’ Party chairman, said during an Aug. 2 convention. Argentina, Paraguay, Chile, Peru, Ecuador, and Colombia have elected Trump-inspired presidents in the recent past.

Lula has strongly defended Brazil’s national sovereignty, stating

his desire to boost the domestic defense industry and protect the country's strategic critical minerals and rare earths.

"We will have to be much more daring to change a lot of things," Lula said.

– The Associated Press

NUMBERS IN THE NEWS

92%

The share of U.S. voters who feel that government corruption is a major issue, according to a recent Brennan Center survey. Voters defined corruption as using elected office for personal gain, prioritizing the interests of billionaires and big corporations, and wasting taxpayer dollars.

\$128.5

MILLION

The amount of cash the Republican National Committee has on hand, according to Federal Election Commission filings covering activity through June 30. By contrast, the Democratic National Committee is more than \$2 million in debt, leaving the RNC with a substantial fundraising advantage heading into the midterm elections.

325,000

The number of people evacuated from their homes as of July 28 in France and Spain as wildfires burned across the region. French President Emmanuel Macron called the blazes some of the worst the country has seen since World War II.

33%

The approval rating of the Supreme Court, according to a July Gallup poll. The figure is the lowest in 26 years, driven largely by Republicans, whose approval of the court dropped from 79% in September 2025 to 58% in July 2026. Rulings unfavorable to the Trump administration, such as those on tariffs and birthright citizenship, might have contributed to the drop.

3:42.66

MINUTES

The new men's mile world record, set by Josh Kerr at the London Diamond League on July 18. The previous record – 3 minutes, 43.13 seconds – was set by Moroccan runner Hicham El Guerrouj in 1999.

– Donald Keough / Staff writer

Sources: Brennan Center for Justice, Federal Election Commission, The New York Times, Al Jazeera, Reuters, Gallup, ESPN

OUR WORLD

Russia and Ukraine trade strikes on warehouses

Russia and Ukraine have been attacking each other's major logistics and retail warehouses, claiming the companies sell military gear for troops on the front lines. At least 10 centers operated by Russian retailer Wildberries were hit during July, causing severe economic losses. According to the independent news outlet Meduza, Wildberries has responded by scrubbing references to equipment – including helmets, body armor, and drones – from some of its online search results. Such goods were formerly offered on a dedicated page on the site. Russia's Ozon and logistics hubs operated by Ukraine's Nova Poshta have also been accused of acting as conduits for military equipment.

– Fred Weir

A maritime arms race on the Korean Peninsula

South Korea has announced plans to launch a next-generation submarine by the mid-2030s, to be named after Jang Bogo, a naval commander from the ninth century. The nuclear-powered submarine will be quieter and faster and have a longer range than older diesel-electric subs from the 1990s. And it's meant to counter North Korea, which says it is developing its own nuclear-powered submarines. Experts say it's not clear whether Pyongyang has the nuclear know-how to put a naval reactor on an operational vessel.

– Matthew Bell

"The truth is coming to light."

That's Balwinder Singh, a Sikh religious leader, commenting on the Indian biographical film "Satluj" to The Associated Press. The film, which describes killings and mysterious disappearances amid a government crackdown during the Punjab separatist insurgency in the 1980s and 1990s, was removed from a streaming platform in India after undergoing many cuts by government censors. Residents in Punjab state now stream copies of the movie at community screenings in Sikh temple courtyards and village halls. "Everything happened right before our eyes, so what is there to oppose?" added Mr. Singh.

– Kelenna Onukwugha

"No prison will silence the feeling of hope we have stirred."

That's what an AI-generated avatar of Jair Bolsonaro, Brazil's former president, said in a video played at a political rally in São Paulo in late July. Mr. Bolsonaro – under house arrest over his role in an attempted coup – wasn't present at the rally where his son Flávio launched his own presidential campaign July 25, 2026, but critics say the 46-second video clip violated electoral rules banning deep-fakes. Jair Bolsonaro's sentencing also bars him from disseminating political or electoral messages. Brazil's top court was hearing a legal challenge at press time.

– Whitney Eulich

PLAINFIELD, VT.

After the college left, a town reimagines learning

Small colleges are closing across the U.S. In Vermont, one community turned a shuttered campus into a different type of education destination.

By **Olivia Fletcher** / Staff writer

Voices bounce off century-old farmhouse walls as actors rehearse for a theater production. Amid the gardens outside, picnic tables fill with attendees of a weeklong writing retreat. And across the grounds, students at a therapeutic school rest in the shade of a tree.

This scene among the pines and mountains of a small central Vermont town reveals how Plainfield, with a population of nearly 1,000 people, is finding a way to solve a problem vexing communities across the United States.

Just two years ago, this buzzing commons was an empty college campus.

Goddard College is one of nearly 2,000 federally funded higher-education institutions that have closed over the past 30 years – and one of 17 four-year private nonprofit colleges to shut their doors in 2024 alone. Small, private, rural colleges are most susceptible to closures due to a combination of declining birth rates and students increasingly choosing the labor market or urban institutions, experts say.

These numbers are only expected to grow. The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education predicts that the number of high school graduates will steadily decline until 2041, reflecting a drop in births after 2007. This will likely lead to fewer traditional college applicants and more college closures. The communities these institutions call home often bear the economic, social, and cultural effects of their closures.

Plainfield is working to restore what it lost by partnering with a private investor and the state to reinvent Goddard College as a vibrant community hub. The Creative Campus at Goddard redefines learning as something rooted in collaboration, creativity, and continuous growth, offering one model for other struggling college towns.

“Just the act of interacting with others on challenging topics does wonders to develop remarkable people,” says Robert Kelchen, professor and head of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

Trying to fill a “cultural hole”

Colleges are often one of the largest employers in rural communities, Dr. Kelchen says. When they close, not only do faculty and staff lose their jobs, but the surrounding economy suffers as local businesses lose customers, which can trigger cascading job losses, prolonged economic depression, and population decline.

But college closures don’t just leave this “economic hole.” They leave “a cultural hole in the community” as well, Dr. Kelchen says.

Nathan Grawe, professor of economics at Carleton College in

Minnesota, says the students, as well as the campus employees and their families, can strengthen local K-12 schools, for example.

The Creative Campus in Plainfield hopes to reimagine this cultural and intellectual life that Goddard College once brought.

After Goddard closed its doors in spring 2024, Michael Davidson, founder of New Hampshire-based property rental company LedgeWorks Inc., bought the 131-acre campus for \$3.4 million. He worked alongside town members and the select board to understand their aspirations and needs for the space and has redeveloped it for community use. The partnership now acts as an “umbrella lessee” overlooking other nonprofits that rent campus buildings, including youth support organizations, a community radio station, and a sustainable food network. Mr. Davidson and The Creative Campus board, many of whom are former Goddard faculty members, continue to create a space for people of all ages to live, convene, and learn.

In the former Goddard mail room, where students once collected letters and packages, neighbors now gather for dinner at the new restaurant. The campus rose garden has traded silence for the sounds of weddings and concerts. Colorful buildings that once housed Goddard students are now available to Vermont youth in need. The property’s manor house, once a Goddard College library and event space, now serves as a rehearsal space for the Goddard Institute of Dramatic Arts.

Barbara Vacarr, former Goddard president and now board member of The Creative Campus, and Kris Gruen, director of The Creative Campus and Haybarn Theatre Arts, say the Creative Campus repurposing works because it breaks down the historic divide between the college and its community. Rather than “turning inward” during difficult times, the campus meets genuine needs.

But the learning continues

Favor Ellis, executive director of Elevate Youth Services, a youth well-being and development nonprofit, found “kinship” through the integrated campus community.

“Proximity matters,” Ms. Ellis says. “It tells a young person, without anyone having to say it out loud, that they belong somewhere ordinary and alive, not somewhere set apart for people who need fixing.”

As the campus fills with new people and purpose, another idea has taken shape: Education doesn’t have to end when a college closes. The Creative Campus team emphasizes lifelong learning, project-based learning, and “learning by doing.”

“The hope is that learning happens in living in the community also,” Ms. Vacarr says. “That it doesn’t necessarily have to be a course that’s being offered, but there is this kind of informal learning that happens when you live in a community.”

Actors and writers swap stories, for example. Nonprofit staff on campus share advice with other organizations.

Ms. Vacarr and Mr. Gruen emphasize that while this model of repurposing is working at Goddard, there’s no one-size-fits-all solution for towns that lose colleges. They believe successful campus repurposing requires collaboration, a coordinated system of state support and funding, and a private owner who understands regional needs.

“I think this is a moment where we all have to put our real collaboration and creativity into thinking and let go of our attachments to what has been, and really ask what can be now,” Ms. Vacarr says. ■

Parents push for less YouTube, more books in schools

A backlash against technology in schools is growing as concerns mount over screen time.

By **Stephanie Cook Broadhurst** / Contributor

Miriam Kendall has never gotten her children an iPad. She doesn't allow screens at home, except for limited TV time. So, when her oldest daughter was handed a tablet in kindergarten, it felt to her like opening a Pandora's box.

"She came home and said, 'Mommy, you have to let me watch YouTube,'" recalls the mother of three from Evanston, Illinois. Ms. Kendall, who encourages her children to play outside and not on devices, held the line on her household rule.

But when her daughter entered second grade, Ms. Kendall found something concerning when she checked the school tablet's tracker: Her daughter had spent two hours watching Taylor Swift videos at school when she should have been learning.

She wondered: Did the school have a clear policy on technology use? She reached out to other parents, who shared her concerns.

Today, Ms. Kendall, founder and director of parent group Screen Sense Evanston, is leading the charge in her neighborhood and with others nationwide to unplug kids from devices in classrooms. She speaks at school board meetings and lobbies for screen-time limits and a return to pencil-and-paper learning, particularly in elementary grades.

"We want there to be a really thoughtful and strategic reevaluation of the use of technology in schools," says Ms. Kendall, who launched a petition last year to limit screen time that garnered over 1,400 signatures in her local pre-K through eighth grade district of about 6,000 students. "This is widespread. ... Parents are demanding change."

Indeed, parents from California to Illinois to Pennsylvania are pushing back against technology they say creates distractions, negatively impacts learning, and conflicts with screen-time limits set at home. Many had heeded the advice of Jonathan Haidt's bestselling book "The Anxious Generation" to limit digital exposure, only to find themselves undermined by the place that is supposed to be most attuned to child development: the classroom.

"How in the world are you providing these highly addictive, highly distracting devices to every single student in the district?" asks Ms. Kendall, who wants to see clearer policies and more staff training.

From a tech surge to growing caution

A decade ago, many districts across the United States raced to close the "homework gap" and "digital divide," as educators viewed technology as essential for preparing students for a modern world. They signed multiyear contracts with technology companies and invested billions of dollars into digital tools such as iPads and Chromebooks. In 2020, the pandemic accelerated the trend as districts used federal Coronavirus Relief Fund money to invest in technology and remote learning.

When students returned to classrooms, parents had hoped to trade tablets for textbooks as it became clear technology could

not replace in-person learning. Today, many school districts have still not fully recovered from historic academic declines in student achievement due to school closures and remote learning, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

"Nobody stepped back after COVID and took a fresh look at the use case for the iPad and the school policies and said, 'Is this the optimal way to use the tool?'" says parent Aaron Friedman of Glenview, Illinois, who launched a petition to limit devices last spring that garnered 1,000 signatures.

In spring 2020, about 45% of public schools assigned devices to individual students, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. By the 2024-25 school year, that figure had nearly doubled: Around 88% of public schools had 1:1 computing programs, which provide every student with a school-issued device.

Organizers point to growing evidence that shows excessive screen time harms children, including a U.S. Department of Health and Human Services advisory issued in May linking it to poorer student well-being.

Many of these parents helped drive the national Wait Until 8th pledge movement to delay smartphones until eighth grade, which over 155,000 families have signed. They're also mobilizing to support school-wide cellphone bans. At least 37 states now require school districts to ban or restrict student cellphone use during class time, according to Education Week.

At school board meetings across the U.S., parents have reported kids playing video games in class and students watching prerecorded lessons instead of learning from a teacher. Part of the solution, parents say, is to let students dig in the dirt during science class or leaf through a library book during English.

Parent Jordan Spicklemire from Morton, Illinois, runs a device-free home for her first-grade son and 2-year-old daughter. She understands that screens can play a role in learning, but she wonders: "Are they better than a human teacher?"

Ms. Spicklemire points to how some learning apps are designed to be highly addictive. She's concerned ed tech companies are profiting from children's education and prefers to use paper flash cards with students she tutors instead of quiz apps that often have pop-up ads.

Internet Safety Labs, a nonprofit research group, reported in 2022 that 96% of educational apps share children's data with third parties, often unbeknownst to students, parents, or schools.

Educators suggest the question isn't whether technology belongs in classrooms, but how it's used. Research shows digital tools can improve literacy and STEM comprehension when used with teacher oversight. A 2024 meta-analysis across 119 studies in the Review of Educational Research looked at ed tech's effects on literacy in K-5 grades and found positive outcomes for reading comprehension and writing proficiency.

But some parents want more say in how their children learn, including the right to remove their students from screen-based instruction. Parents in the Lower Merion School District in Pennsylvania drew national attention in June when yelling broke out at a board meeting after the district repealed a policy that had given families a choice to opt out.

Many districts, including Lower Merion, are reexamining their policies. After facing pressure from parents and the group Schools Beyond Screens, the Los Angeles Unified School District in June approved a ban on classroom screen time for students through first grade, while gradually increasing access in higher grade levels. Meanwhile, at least 16 states have introduced or enacted legislation to limit screen time or take a closer look at ed tech policies.

Since launching her petition in Evanston, Ms. Kendall says her district has banned YouTube and over 300 noneducational apps from school-issued devices. The district also agreed to screen-free indoor recess, she says. The Evanston-Skokie School District 65 did not respond to requests for comment.

When Mr. Friedman brought parents' concerns to his school board in Glenview last spring, they listened. "Our district takes this very seriously," says Mr. Friedman, who has a third grader. "Within a matter of weeks, they came back and instituted meaningful changes," he says, including a decision to review and clarify appropriate use policies for technology in classrooms.

Parents agree technology, when properly supervised, can help students conduct research, take online exams, or learn multimedia skills.

College student Nadia Easley from Northbrook, Illinois, learned how to type and code in middle school at a private school, Willows Academy. But getting taught by humans is what she remembers most. She grew to love her least favorite subject, history, thanks to a teacher who made the class engaging.

A survey of 600 U.S. teachers in May found that 85% believe students spend too much time on screens in class, according to researchers at Auburn University College of Education and Christopher Newport University.

It's soft skills that matter most, and those are learned face to face, with good, in-person interactions, says Kim Whitman, a parent from Overland Park, Kansas, and organizer with Distraction-Free Schools Policy Project. "Kids coming out of school need to be able to speak to people and look them in the eye." ■

Education's AI 'gold rush' comes with risks

As Silicon Valley titans and startups cash in, educators and parents struggle to decide which tools help – and harm.

By Aaron Glantz / Staff writer

Across the United States, financially strapped school districts are spending increasing amounts of money on artificial intelligence products, despite a growing body of research showing AI can harm children's ability to think.

Education's AI sector, virtually nonexistent before ChatGPT's release in 2022, grew to \$730 million in 2026, according to a report prepared for The Monitor by Future Market Insights. The research firm projects the market for AI in K-12 education will grow by 40% annually for the next decade, reaching \$18.5 billion in 2036.

The beneficiaries, observers say, are a growing list of companies with names like MagicSchool, SchoolAI, and Buddy. They seek to profit from a quandary increasingly facing educators: Students and teachers are already using AI. But not always in a way that facilitates learning.

"My students can put a homework question into Google and the AI summary will give them the answer," says Merek Chang, who teaches chemistry and biology at Los Altos High School in the San Gabriel Valley, outside Los Angeles.

The tech companies say their specialized AI products provide the solution. AI can help teachers write lesson plans and grade papers, saving them time, the companies say, while "personalized learning" bots cater to students' individual needs and produce spectacular academic gains.

But without a significant body of research proving these tools' efficacy – and some studies showing harm – a growing number of experts are worried that children have become the guinea pigs of the next Big Tech experiment.

"There has been an absolute gold rush," says Kris Hagel, chief information officer at the Peninsula School District, outside Tacoma, Washington.

Meanwhile, frontier AI firms Anthropic and OpenAI have announced they are offering their Claude and ChatGPT products to educators for free – but only temporarily. Anthropic's commitment to complimentary service for educators expires June 2027; OpenAI's expires June 2028.

"They want to capture the market. We've seen this many times before," says Chris Agnew, director of the Generative AI for Education Hub at Stanford University.

In an interview, OpenAI's vice president of education, Leah Belsky, declined to speculate on whether ChatGPT would remain free for educators, but she said helping teachers is part of the company's mission. Anthropic did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

Balancing promise with peril

According to the Center for Democracy and Technology, an estimated 85% of teachers and 86% of students already utilize generative AI in their schoolwork.

The Trump administration has pushed school districts to incorporate AI. In July 2025, the Department of Education, which Mr. Trump seeks to dismantle, issued guidance that encourages educators to "harness the potential of AI," by utilizing "high-quality" AI instructional materials and deploying "AI-enhanced high-impact tutoring." But the department has not set standards to help local officials vet these tools. In April 2025, Education Secretary Linda McMahon elicited cackles from the administration's critics when she mistakenly referred to AI as "AI" in a speech at Arizona State University.

Without federal standards, more than 30 states have adopted their own guidelines. A few, including Wyoming and North Carolina, have provided districts with robust frameworks to balance the technology's promise with its peril.

Part of Wyoming's guidance is a video on the state's Department of Education website titled "Threat Assessment." It begins with a warning: AI is "already here," it says, "inside the ed tech tools you're probably already paying for," before adding that without federal standards "this job just got harder," because "all the responsibility for checking every single tool for safety, for privacy, for whether it even works, that now falls squarely on you." The video then lays a laundry list of red flags – from apps that collect data on students to those that target them with advertisements to those that may harm their ability to learn.

Wyoming's Department of Education also provides vetting tools to districts. One of them, developed by Project Unicorn, a consortium of nonprofit organizations and school associations, is a chatbot that evaluates other AI applications. Project Unicorn's website includes its own disclaimer: "While every effort has been made to ensure accuracy and relevance, please treat all information

as guidance and informational rather than final legal, technical or purchasing advice.”

The lack of clarity around the new technology has opened the door for corruption, some worry.

On June 21, Los Angeles Unified School District Superintendent Alberto Carvalho resigned after his home was raided by the FBI amid an investigation into a district contract for an AI chatbot. Two weeks later in New York, Schools Chancellor Kamar Samuels asked principals to pause purchases of AI software after New York City Council members demanded a moratorium on AI’s use in schools “until rigorous guardrails can be developed with public and expert input, to prevent serious damage to NYC children and their future.” A broader petition seeking a two-year moratorium on generative AI use in the city schools has generated thousands of signatures.

Industry’s sunny vision

In Silicon Valley, a rising cadre of founders offers a far sunnier vision of AI’s impact on education, exhibiting characteristically brash confidence while issuing bold statements about their technology’s power to uplift children and transform learning.

Among the competing startups is Bloomy, an AI learning bot developed by Alex Southmayd, a former McKinsey & Company consultant. Mr. Southmayd once recruited drivers for Lyft, the ride-hailing company. Now, he is building Bloomy at Y Combinator, the San Francisco tech incubator that has helped launch a long list of Silicon Valley titans, including Airbnb and DoorDash.

“Why have a teacher lecture 30 students at once when each student can receive a customized lesson that’s perfect for them?” Mr. Southmayd asks. He imagines a world where students receive AI-enabled personalized instruction from his Bloomy app, gamified through the receipt of “Bloomy Bucks” for correct answers to be redeemed with a teacher.

Mr. Southmayd says he knows parents are worried about the damaging effect excessive screen time can have on their children, but he argues his app is good for kids’ development.

“Social media, as well as many ed tech platforms ... erodes focus and mental resilience,” he says. “We structure the experience so that students ... find satisfaction in effort, patience, and mastery rather than passive consumption.”

Mr. Southmayd says pilot results – mostly in charter schools – show his app improves student performance in both writing and math. But like most of its competitors, Bloomy’s performance has not been subject to randomized, controlled trials that compare it to regular school instruction.

According to Stanford’s Mr. Agnew, the effectiveness of “personalized learning” chatbots has yet to be independently established by researchers. Very few rigorous studies have even been conducted, he says.

“I have not seen anything that shows we can replace the human teacher, nor should we,” he adds.

Indeed, Mr. Agnew’s center at Stanford has documented a performance cliff borne of intellectual outsourcing to AI. While students using unrestricted AI show immediate performance improvement while using AI agents, their performance plummets once the tool is removed.

Education experts say this is in line with what we’re learning about the impact of AI use among adults. In February, a team of researchers from the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School of Business published a study that found use of artificial intelligence was “reshaping human reasoning” and leading to “cognitive sur-

render.” The study involved 1,300 participants and 10,000 trials.

Robbie Torney, head of Digital and AI Assessments for the non-profit Common Sense Media, says school districts should remember the fundamentals of what’s known to work in education: “A sense of belonging, connection to a teacher, and connection to community, which motivate students to learn.”

Mr. Southmayd counters that his company does not seek to replace teachers but wants to free them up for more one-on-one instruction. “I don’t know any teacher who feels they have too much time,” he says.

No firm is better positioned to benefit from the growth of AI in education than Google, which has gifted millions of Chromebook laptops to children and whose software suite, Google Classroom, is already used by most school districts.

With minimal fanfare, Google has integrated its Gemini and NotebookLM AI tools into the Google Classroom suite. Consumer testing of Gemini by the nonprofit group Common Sense Media, however, found the version of Gemini being made available to schools has “the same safety problems as the consumer version.” The group rated Gemini for schools “high risk.”

Among other things, Common Sense Media found Gemini’s K-12 chatbot treats a sixth grader the same as a high school senior, “providing identical responses despite vast developmental differences” and “can surface inappropriate content.” Gemini also allows students to seamlessly switch back-and-forth between the school version, which is designed to teach, and the consumer version, which will simply give them the answer.

Google declined a request to comment on Common Sense Media findings and did not respond to the substance of eight questions posed by the Monitor. Instead, company spokesperson Maggie Shiels replied with a statement. “We know AI raises important questions,” it read. “That’s why we build with educators and experts to ensure our AI is helpful, safe by design, and grounded in pedagogy and how people actually learn. We believe technology, when used effectively with educators in the lead, unlocks student potential.”

The company added that school administrators have the power to turn Gemini off.

Uncertainty in the classroom

Mr. Agnew said early research findings have been more positive when it comes to AI’s deployment as a resource for teachers, such as assisting in the drafting of lesson plans or analyzing individual students’ needs.

“AI can reduce teacher time spent on routine tasks,” with no evidence of quality loss, according to a report his center published. AI can also be effective in streamlining administrative tasks, such as scheduling school buses, Mr. Agnew says.

At the Peninsula School District outside Tacoma, Mr. Hagel says he has developed AI assistants that help teachers take attendance, write up summaries of playground fights, and hone financial analyses.

Common Sense Media ranks these tasks as lower risk than the deployment of AI for classroom instruction, but there are concerns nonetheless. “AI can be biased,” Mr. Torney says. “They have been found to give women different salary negotiation advice than men and produce different evaluations of the same resume when only the name at the top has changed.”

Mr. Torney says his organization has found similar discrepancies when using AI to grade school assignments. When the AI chatbot grades the same paper hundreds of times, it does not always pro-

vide the same grade. The result can also be different depending on the race and gender most commonly associated with the name at the top.

Classroom teachers are often left to navigate this themselves. Mr. Chang told the Monitor there has been no mandatory professional development AI training for teachers in his district.

He says his focus has been on building “AI literacy” to help his students better understand how the technology works.

In a recent chemistry class, he asked his students – 90 % of whom are Latino and 80% of whom qualify for free or reduced-price lunch – to pick a substance of their choice and investigate its molecular structure. One picked the styling product pomade: “What is the molecular structure of pomade that it allows you to keep your hair up?” he asked a bot.

Together, they work through questions about double bonds and single bonds – chemistry concepts they were learning in class – and how that might work in the real world.

“Typically the way they use AI, it’s like a Google search, you type in your question and you get some kind of output,” Mr. Chang says. “This way you have to define what your input is and get information from a verified source. So we have to understand what a trustworthy source is and get in that mindset.”

“I can’t imagine the future of AI and what it might look like,” Mr. Chang says, “but as a teacher I can’t ignore it.” ■

‘Don’t just believe. Look.’

Sal Khan, the founder of Khan Academy, is arguably the most visible figure in U.S. education. He’s drawn praise from figures such as Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates and former first lady Michelle Obama, his 2011 TED Talk on reinventing education garnered some 6 million views, and his free online tutorials have racked up billions of views on YouTube.

So observers took notice, when, in May 2023, Mr. Khan declared in another TED Talk that artificial intelligence represented “probably the biggest positive transformation that education has ever seen.” He understood that AI could help students cheat, but he also argued it was capable of personalizing lessons for every student, essentially providing every child with a customized, digital tutor.

Mr. Khan developed a chatbot called Khanmigo after being given early access to ChatGPT. He touted the tool in a “60 Minutes” television segment with Anderson Cooper, was featured in the book “AI for Good” by Atlantic staff writer Josh Tyrangiel, and penned his own book, “Brave New Words: How AI Will Revolutionize Education (and Why That’s a Good Thing).”

But the revolution has not yet materialized the way Mr. Kahn predicted.

In an April interview with the news site Chalkbeat, the YouTube star acknowledged that “for a lot of students,” Khanmigo “was a non-event.” Many “just don’t use it much,” he said. Still, he remains bullish on AI’s future in education.

He sat down with **Monitor AI Bureau Chief Aaron Glantz** in July. Here are excerpts of their conversation, lightly edited for clarity and brevity.

Aaron Glantz: When I started reporting on AI and education, everyone pointed me to you because you were working with ChatGPT before it was known to most people. So I’m curious, what have you learned over the past few years?

Sal Khan: From the beginning, we were very careful that the AI wouldn’t give answers, that it would be Socratic; it would nudge you forward; it would provide teachers and parents with transparency as to what was going on. But what we realized is that for a lot of students, just having that extra layer of support wasn’t enough. Imagine I walk into a classroom and I say, “Hey kids, my name is Sal. I think I’m a pretty good tutor. I’m just going to sit in the back of the room here, and if any of you have any questions, I’m happy to help you.” Well, you can imagine what would happen. Some of the kids maybe would leverage it, but a lot of kids might be too embarrassed. They wouldn’t know how to do it.

The easiest thing for the student to do is cut and paste the Google search’s AI summary and they’ll have the answer. You’re offering a different path, but the students didn’t necessarily engage in the way that you had hoped, right?

Yeah. When we launched Khanmigo in 2023, we were already acutely aware ChatGPT was going to be a cheating nightmare. We have observed kids in classrooms doing Khan Academy. Then they’d go to another ed tech tool that the district is paying for, throw the Khan Academy question into that, and get the answer.

But I was thinking, “OK, if we had resources, what would a human do?” At some point, I should go walk up to the students and observe what they’re doing. When they get a question wrong, they might be embarrassed to ask me. But what if I went proactively to that student and said “Look, Billy, I saw that you just got that question wrong. Why don’t you and I work on that a little bit?” That’s essentially what we have evolved into. We piloted a new version last year, and now we’re rolling it out to millions of students around the country. When you get a question wrong, the AI says, “Hey, why don’t you work with me a little bit on this question?” And [the teacher can then say:] If you can show me that you really understand it, I’ll give you credit for it.

But you have to get the student to actually engage with the bot and want to learn.

Exactly. What you’re describing is not unique to AI. I hate to say it. Even putting all technology aside, there’s a lot of classrooms where kids are pretending to pay attention.

This is why we have been partnering with teachers and districts so closely – because we see that when teachers make it part of the assignments, that drives engagement for most students. The first version of Khanmigo was completely optional. Now, it’s actually in the student’s incentive to work with the AI because if the AI deems that you know it, now you’ll get credit for it.

Imagine a class of 30 students, all working on their different things. We highlight to teachers that these five kids are really struggling with negative exponents. And we can now tell the teacher, “You don’t have to slow down all the other 25 kids, but you take these five kids aside and assign a tutoring session with Khanmigo on negative exponents.”

AI has problems with judgment and bias. How do you think about what AI is good for now?

Humans also have a lot of bias. There actually have been studies about how human beings grade students differently based on their perceptions of them. I don’t say that to dismiss the fears of AI. I just also want to say the bar shouldn’t be perfection. The goal is: Could you have a system that’s more consistent and less biased than the status quo? Even if you had an amazing English teacher,

who gives very consistent and good feedback, if that teacher has to grade 100 papers on “The Great Gatsby,” it’s going to take them a week or two, and in many cases, the limiting factor on how much feedback you can get depends on how much bandwidth the teacher has, and the teacher ... is spending so much time.

We do not do AI grading of full papers yet, but we do have a system that gives AI feedback on papers, and I do think in the next year it will be possible to do pretty solid rubrics-based grading. The benefit of a technical system is that you can benchmark it. You can test it for bias – checking whether details like a family’s cultural background in any way change the feedback that is given.

We don’t really have a centralized education system, and local school officials and teachers often lack information they need to make a smart decision about AI.

What you’re describing is very real. I’ve been telling every university and every school district, regardless of whether they’re using Khan Academy or if they want to go completely nontech or not, I’m like: Assume kids are using AI for any take-home assignment. Even in the classroom, like when kids are on a computer screen, you need to very carefully monitor what they’re doing – even things as basic as Google are AI now.

If you leave a laptop on kids’ desks all day, nothing good’s going to happen. What we should say is: OK, we want these kids to learn math, get a lot of reading comprehension practice, write a lot and get a lot of feedback, and let the teacher spend energy on the human work of teaching – things no technology can do. You can use technology like Khan Academy to drive personalized practice.

Don’t just believe. Look at things that have a base of evidence. For example, we worked closely with Newark Public Schools. They’ve been deep with Khan Academy for about four years, and Khan Academy is a major part of why Newark is now seeing three times the growth in math compared to the state of New Jersey, despite being one of the state’s poorer districts. It’s because of the way they have integrated the tech with human teachers. ■

BOSTON

Even in Massachusetts, schools face segregation

Seventy years after Brown v. Board of Education, students in the Bay State are suing. They say they still face a separate and unequal education.

By Cameron Pugh / Staff writer

Fifty years ago, Massachusetts became a national test case for equity in schools, after riots erupted over policies meant to undo decades of harmful segregation. Courts had ordered the state to bus students across Boston neighborhoods to integrate schools. While the policy remained fraught, by the mid-1980s, a federal appeals court proclaimed schools here as desegregated as was reasonably possible.

Today, Massachusetts ranks among the best states in the country for public education. Boston switched to a “home-based” model in 2014 that claimed to give all families access to high-performing

schools without the commute. Even as student test scores have plunged nationwide, public schools in the state continue to make top grades in math and reading.

But a lawsuit filed in May says the challenge of segregation is not over.

Nine students, represented by their guardians, along with four nonprofit groups, have sued Massachusetts, saying the commonwealth had denied schoolchildren the right to an adequate education and to equal protection under the law. They argue that the state maintains “racially segregated school districts characterized by concentrated poverty that deny Black and Latino students an adequate and equal education and undermine the State’s civic and economic future.” And they demand a fix to what the lawsuit calls a “two-tiered” system that “has enormous negative consequences.”

The case reflects challenges that go well beyond the Bay State. More than 70 years after Brown v. Board of Education, when the Supreme Court ruled that separating students on the basis of race is unconstitutional, large school districts across the country are segregated by both race and economics.

In 2024, researchers at Stanford University and the University of Southern California found that segregation between white and Black students in the country’s 100 largest school districts had risen 64% since 1988. Segregation by economic status has also increased by about 50 percent since 1991, they discovered. (At the same time, most school districts in the country are far less segregated than they were 60 years ago, researchers found.) More than one-third of students attended a school where over 75% of the student body was one race or ethnicity during the 2021-22 school year, according to the U.S. Government Accountability Office.

Polymakers, educators and families recognize that achievement gaps often parallel these economic and racial data. Separate lawsuits from Minnesota and New Jersey, filed in 2015 and 2018, respectively, remain ongoing.

In Massachusetts, a 2024 report from the state’s Racial Imbalance Advisory Council (RIAC) classified 63% of public schools here as either “segregated” or “intensely segregated,” which they defined as 71% white or nonwhite or 90% white or nonwhite. Intensely segregated white schools averaged a 66.3% performance score on state accountability data, compared with just 18.7% for intensely segregated non-white schools. High school graduation rates were 93% at nearly all-white schools, versus 72% at schools where children of color make up more than 90% of the student body, according to the council.

“If you are a Black or Latino student who comes from a low-income or underpaid family, your educational prospects – before you have even begun – are severely limited,” says Raul Fernandez, a senior lecturer at Boston University’s Wheelock College of Education & Human Development.

Across the country, students are assigned to schools largely based upon where that child’s family lives. Because public schools are predominately funded by property taxes and state money, in general, lower-income communities have schools with less money. And because lower-income areas are disproportionately Black and Latino, this means that children of color have a disproportionate likelihood of an under-resourced education.

Massachusetts policymakers have tried in myriad ways to address what they agree is a problem. Since 2019, the state has funneled more than \$1 billion into public schools through the Student Opportunity Act, which aimed to increase aid to districts with the highest need. The state has also created programs to address gaps in graduation

rates, diversify the public school workforce, and reduce dropout rates and absenteeism.

"All students, no matter their income level, race/ethnicity, language, or disability, deserve schools where they are known, valued, and have the support they need to succeed," Jacqueline Reis, a spokesperson for the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, the state agency overseeing K-12 learning, wrote in a statement.

But the department also says it lacks authority to change school district boundaries or to force students to enroll in other districts.

State law gives students the right to attend public school in the town where they reside, free of charge. At the same time, schools generally do not have to accept students who live outside the town's district. In most cases, school district boundaries mirror municipal borders. A resident of Boston, for example, has a legal right to attend schools in Boston, but not in a neighboring city such as Cambridge.

And across municipal borders, the quality of curricula can vary widely.

In Brockton, for instance, a school district near Boston where 83% of students are Black or Latino, about 42% of 11th and 12th grade students complete an advanced course. In bordering Easton, where 72% of students are white, the share that completes advanced coursework is 70%, according to state data.

"You can throw funding at these schools in separate settings, but really being able to address the integration issue – to desegregate these schools – is really what will help move the ball forward," says Andrea Watson, an attorney for the nonprofit Brown's Promise, which filed the lawsuit with Lawyers for Civil Rights.

But not all education experts agree. Charles Glenn, a professor emeritus at Boston University's Wheelock College, sees no reason that schools serving mostly Black or Latino students can't provide a quality education.

"I'm not knocking desegregation. I think desegregation is important for societal reasons," says Dr. Glenn, who spent two decades as director of urban education and equity efforts for the state's education department. "That said, I think we too easily insist that unless we can put Black kids in school with white kids, we can't provide top-rate education for them.

"I would urge those who are concerned about real opportunity for Black and Latino kids to focus on making schools more effective," he adds.

Scholars have long criticized the country's reliance on property taxes to fund schools. Property taxes accounted for 52% of public school funding in Massachusetts during the 2021-22 school year, according to federal data, making the state's schools some of the most property-tax-reliant in the country.

Even if low-income areas had higher taxes, "by sheer nature of lower property tax wealth, you're not going to garner as much local revenue," says Ericka Weathers, who studies educational equity at University of Pennsylvania.

The Massachusetts plaintiffs propose some solutions, including establishing cross-district magnet schools and expanding existing programs such as the Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity. Founded in 1966 to reduce school segregation in Boston, METCO buses students from the urban cities of Boston and Springfield to nearby suburban districts. But it currently serves only 0.35% of public school students, according to the lawsuit.

Dr. Fernandez says that, regardless of how Massachusetts addresses segregation, it must recognize its responsibility to the children who live here.

"We need the state to step in and make what I call generational investments in these communities," he says. "These are the commonwealth's kids. ... We're responsible for all of them." ■

New cohorts of Americans find passport to study abroad

U.S. community college students see value in finishing degrees overseas. A novel platform helps them connect.

By Ira Porter / Staff writer

Unlike her friends and classmates, Sloan Hull didn't want to attend a four-year college after high school. She knew she wanted to be a chef and chose Orange Coast College, a public community college near Los Angeles, for its culinary arts associate degree.

She graduated in December, and had planned to transfer to a top U.S. culinary school, until she realized the school would not accept her transfer credits, meaning she faced four years of about \$40,000 annual tuition.

The Transfer Abroad Network, a new business based in California, offered another option. It helps U.S. community college students transfer to international schools to finish bachelor's degrees. Ms. Hull saw a more economical path to a higher degree and the opportunity to study abroad.

TAN's founders, Ashley Warmington and Emma Schwartz Lara, told her about a short summer program at the Business and Hotel Management School in Lucerne, Switzerland.

There Ms. Hull cooked with chefs, met students from around the world, and decided to enroll in a fast-track, one-year bachelor's degree program. She is scheduled to start school near the end of August.

"I really never considered going abroad just because I had no idea that my credits could transfer," she says.

Clearing a path

TAN started in late 2025, and launched with university partners for spring semester 2026. Programs are traditional two-year and one-year bachelor's degrees for students who have their associate degree.

TAN's founders say the platform streamlines the transfer process and includes specific transcript information, required classes, GPA requirements, costs, and financial aid information.

The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, which has been tracking a cohort of students who began community college in the fall of 2018, found that fewer than one-third of those students transferred to a four-year school within six years.

The reasons vary: curriculum mismatches, as well as unclear transfer rules, prerequisites, and GPA requirements. And U.S. higher education is among the most expensive in the world. The average tuition, not including room and board, for an in-state public four-year college last year was \$11,371 and \$25,415 for out-of-state, according to U.S. News & World Report. Private schools averaged \$44,961.

TAN identifies schools outside the U.S. that offer accredited degrees, as well as those that accept U.S. government financial aid to students. U.S. community college students get a more affordable path to finishing a bachelor's degree and the schools they partner with gain access to part of the U.S. higher education market.

A growing network

Today, TAN has partnerships with 20 schools in 13 countries, with 11 more schools in the onboarding process. These schools are in countries including Australia, New Zealand, France, Italy, Greece, Japan, the United Arab Emirates, and Spain.

"Emma and I both worked in international education for so many years. We would be helping students apply to go overseas and oftentimes there would be so many barriers along the way," says TAN's Ms. Warmington. She and Ms. Schwartz Lara both studied abroad and later worked as recruiters for international education and study abroad programs in Australia and the United Kingdom. They said that the hiccups to transferring were due to the administrative and admissions process and not students' fault.

"Universities were just blocked off from connecting with this broader audience of transfer students that had amazing potential," Ms. Warmington says.

Ms. Schwartz Lara adds that TAN knows that there is huge interest in it from the community they serve, but people are unaware of the opportunities and that it's often more affordable than going to school in the United States.

Opening a U.S. market

There are no official statistics for how many community college students transfer abroad, but experts say the number is small. Only 1% to 2% of U.S. college students study abroad between four-year and community colleges, according to NAFSA: Association of International Educators. Additionally, only 16% of students who start at community college transfer and finish a degree.

"It's a big, wide-open field and there are a lot of community colleges out there," says Beth Thomas, international officer for the Americas at Abertay University in Scotland, a TAN partner.

"Not all students will have the option to financially look at going overseas, so I think this will be a game changer for the right students," she adds.

TAN helps schools like hers raise their profile with U.S. students, so it was worth her school paying the annual fee to join the network, she says. TAN said the flat fee does not change with enrollment size, but declined to say how much it is.

Ms. Thomas says that in the past her office would go back and forth with students about the correct materials to send, but now TAN handles that. Abertay accepts U.S. financial aid and offers scholarships to international students. Community college students interest her because she doesn't want to miss nontraditional students who may have started school late or who have families. The biggest dividend is spreading awareness about Abertay.

"A lot of community college students wouldn't think this is an opportunity that they can take advantage of," Ms. Thomas says. "The more that they can do to raise that awareness to say, 'This is an option for you, you can do this, you can go overseas and here's how you do it,' that's fantastic."

Tara Zirkel, director of strategic research with education consultant firm EAB, says that TAN could appeal to community college students because the pathway is predictable and clear. She says that recent high school grads who are unsure if they want to attend a

four-year school abroad could be drawn to the idea of doing community college for two years and then going to Australia or the U.K. But they need to see that what they want to happen – for example, landing a job – is achievable, Ms. Zirkel says.

An equality of opportunity

Ms. Hull's community college in Costa Mesa, California, was the first to work with TAN.

Greg Buie is the program facilitator at the school's Global Engagement Center. He wants community college students to have study abroad experiences and to connect with the world in a way that their peers at four-year schools do.

"We want community college students to be able to have the same access to those types of learning opportunities and experiential, personal growth opportunities, so [TAN] is filling a need that exists," Mr. Buie adds.

The platform is free for community colleges and students to join. He thinks that more students will begin to take advantage of it. Mr. Buie says that streamlining the process makes it easier for community college administrators and could result in substantial savings for students.

"That could be the difference between someone transferring at all or stopping at the associate level," Mr. Buie says.

By transferring her community college credits and doing the one-year culinary bachelor's program in Switzerland, Ms. Hull will pay a little more than a quarter of what she would have had to spend over four years starting from scratch at a culinary school in New York. She secured housing in Switzerland, got financial aid, and will complete a paid six-month internship that is built into her program. She hopes to one day be a private chef and own a brunch café.

"I think that going abroad is definitely a big risk to take, and I think that everyone should experience some kind of risk like that and go abroad," Ms. Hull says. "I think that community college students deserve the same chance as anybody else." ■

REPORTERS ON THE JOB

WASHINGTON



Caitlin Babcock

The halls were bustling outside the Senate floor, where I was reporting on government shutdowns. The clack of dress shoes on marble floors echoed through the corridors as reporters approached lawmakers, black-clad servers carried food into luncheons, and teenagers wandered through the halls. The Capitol may be the seat of legislation, but it's also a classroom. During spring-break season, I often plan alternate routes to avoid hallways filled with students on field trips. Observing the Senate floor recently, I was joined by a troop from Scouting America learning about governance. Moments such as these remind me that the Capitol belongs to all Americans. ■

MEXICO CITY



Whitney Eulich

I reported on education in Latin America for years before enrolling my own children in school in Mexico. I was familiar with the regional norm of the "double shift," where some children attend school in the morning for four to five hours and another group comes in the afternoon. It was popularized in the 1950s as a way to bring more children into the education system.

What I wasn't prepared for, however, were the short school days – even in schools without a double shift. My kids get out around 1:30 p.m. World Bank research shows that longer hours at school don't automatically mean more learning. But longer days can increase female labor-force participation – something I think about every time my kids knock on my office door around 2 p.m. to tell me how hungry or bored they are. ■

NEW CASTLE, DELAWARE



Ira Porter

As the Monitor's higher education reporter, I've seen the challenges facing colleges recently through my reporting, including at an Education Writers Association seminar in Baltimore and in conversations with faculty and students.

Temple University laid off 40 employees and announced a projected \$85 million budget deficit. Syracuse University offered voluntary retirement packages to 175 employees and eliminated or paused 93 academic programs. Howard University unenrolled 502 students who missed financial aid deadlines before reenrolling some and extending deadlines. The One Big Beautiful Bill will make college more expensive by capping and eliminating financial aid programs. I'll be following these changes closely and writing about what they mean for higher education. ■

SLOVIANSK, UKRAINE



Scott Peterson

I had twice written for the Monitor about the brave Ukrainian teacher Olha Lytenko, who taught her students in the eastern town of Lyman, at times just 10 miles from the front line. Powered by two wood-burning stoves, a generator, and Starlink satellite internet, her single-classroom school

offered the handful of remaining children warmth, connection, and a bright sanctuary from war. But when I returned to Ukraine in July, Russian forces had crept closer to Lyman. Fiber-optic cables from constant Russian and Ukrainian drones crisscrossed the town. Ms. Lytenko's phone was out of service; she and her class were likely forced to leave. ■

JOHANNESBURG



Ryan Lenora Brown

The sticky juice of a Popsicle dribbling down my hand. The prickle of chlorine in my nose. An orchestra of crickets on warm evenings. These are feelings I associate with summer: the months of June, July, and August. So when I moved to Johannesburg a decade ago, the sight of kids in uniforms walking to school during those months,

hands braided over their chests to keep warm against the winter chill, jarred me. But that's how hemispheres work, and school schedules naturally rotate around the seasons. I still haven't gotten used to the school year starting in January or spring break brushing up against Halloween. Some part of me will always be hardwired to see September as back-to-school season, the moment life resets and begins anew. ■

The class menagerie

From gerbils to bearded dragons, school pets have something to teach you.

By Olivia Fletcher, Donald Keough, Kelenna Onukwugha, Emily Staunton, and Medara Udoekong / Staff writers

Pets have been crawling, slithering, and hopping through classrooms across the United States for years. But now, schools and researchers are discovering what kids already know: These animals are more than a cute member of the classroom. They are important for learning, too.

Several recent studies have found that spending time with pets helps kids develop social skills and how to handle challenging emotions.

Kayleigh Smith, a middle school art teacher in North Providence, Rhode Island, brought her Scottish Straight cat, Pinecone, to class for the better part of the last school year. Pinecone has been able to achieve what many teachers find difficult to accomplish – getting a room full of middle schoolers to lower their voices.

"I feel like the class is overall just a lot calmer," says Ms. Smith.

Pets also can help turn regular lesson plans into silly, educational moments. To make multiplication fun, for instance, Benjamin Shaw enlisted his classroom's bearded dragon, Mushu.

"Mushu wants to eat five bugs, and there are three bowls, and each has five bugs. How many bugs in total?" Mr. Shaw asked his Dallas-Fort Worth third graders. Mushu has also been the center of habitat and animal anatomy lessons, showing off his scales.

"Our teachers and our families are looking for alternative, hands-on educational content and material where it's not just to attach to another screen," says Melinda Thomas, executive director of The Pet Care Trust, a group that helps support school animals.

The organization's Pets in the Classroom program awarded more than 16,000 grants to teachers across the United States and Canada in the 2025-2026 school year to help cover initial pet care expenses.

But as adorable and helpful as these scaly and furry friends are, it's important to think about having a pet from the pet's perspective, too.

While "you can easily say the kids would love it [pets], if you leave it at that, you're really missing out on the bigger picture," says Laura Ireland, the associate director of the Animal Law and Policy Institute at Vermont Law and Graduate School.

Caring properly for classroom pets requires teachers to ask themselves a lot of questions. Do they have the right habitat? Does the pet want to be held by 20 students in a day? Who is caring for the animal during school breaks or taking them to the vet?

Ms. Ireland also worries about where class pets originate. Some pet stores get animals from disreputable breeders, including enterprises called "mills" that prioritize churning out animals for profit and ignore animal well-being. If the pets come from a source that isn't good for the animals, what lesson does that teach students?

"Thinking through all those issues ... there is a way to do it correctly, but there's so many ways for it go wrong," Ms. Ireland says about classroom pets. She recommends to "try to look at things from the animal's perspective ... and then trying to put a voice to that."

This often means that teachers take on a lot of the pet care responsibilities. So, next time you see a teacher cleaning out a hamster cage, remember to say thank you.

Morgan Keohane, an elementary school librarian and technology specialist in Boston, says her students love hanging out with her two guinea pigs – and that she’s happy to care for the animals during the summer.

“If you are an animal lover and are willing to take on [the responsibilities], students will reap some incredible benefits,” Ms. Keohane says. ■

HUNNY BUNNY Rabbit

Hunny Bunny has been the star of teacher Becky Williams’ class at the Montessori School of Alexandria in Virginia for almost two years.

Ms. Williams introduced the rabbit to her class of 3-to-6-year-olds when the animal was six months old. Her students keep each other accountable for not being too loud and “hurting Hunny Bunny’s ears.”

Fun fact: Because bunnies’ eyes are placed on either side of their heads, they have an almost 360 degree field of sight. This allows them to scan their surroundings for predators without turning their heads.

SMOKEY AND BANDIT Guinea pigs

Morgan Keohane, a librarian and technology specialist at Lilia G. Frederick Elementary school in Boston, brought her first guinea pig into the classroom a decade ago to help as a reading buddy. She noticed that some students who were shy with other humans felt comfortable reading aloud to the animals. She adopted Smokey and Bandit in April 2024.

Fun fact: A guinea pig’s teeth never stop growing, so it needs to constantly chew on things to keep them healthy and filed down.

MUSHU AND ELIZABETH Bearded dragons

Third grade teacher Benjamin Shaw grew up taking care of bearded dragons. In the classroom, he’s found that they help him with lessons and build classroom culture. Named after the small dragon in “Mulan” and the lizard from “The Magic School Bus,” Mushu and Elizabeth have been class pets together for two years.

Fun Fact: Bearded dragons were around at the same time as dinosaurs. They can see in color and change color. The spines on their chin puff up to scare off predators.

POETRY

THE END OF SUMMER

*The end of summer is a rush.
An insistent cicada’s buzzing –
A reminder of what is to come
And what once was.*

The end of summer is relief.

*Finally back to normal routines –
Less freedom, but it almost
Feels like more.*

*The end of summer is a closing book.
But flowers still bloom –
Hydrangeas, zinnias,
And the sweet blackberry.*

*By the first days of autumn, there’s no denying.
No saying there are more summer days –
Because there are not. But you know
There will be again.*

– Lydia Wilson, eighth grade,
Hatfield, Massachusetts

BACK TO SCHOOL: THE HOME FORUM

JOHANNESBURG

Dear Pen Pal, how far is South Africa from Mexico?

Our Africa editor began a letter exchange for local students. She ended up with an archive of childhood.

By Ryan Lenora Brown / Special correspondent

On a bright Saturday morning in February, I stood in front of a classroom in Johannesburg and announced triumphantly to the 30 kids seated in front of me: “We’re getting pen pals!” Rows of blank faces stared back at me. I waited. They waited. Finally, one girl raised her hand. “Ma’am,” she began tentatively, “what is a pen pal?”

I was born in the United States at the end of the 1980s – a time these kids earnestly refer to as “the 1900s.” That makes me part of the last generation to know the world before the internet. I am not sure who first introduced me to pen pals, but in my childhood, I had a handful. I don’t remember anything about them, only the thrill of receiving an envelope in some unknown handwriting with a return address from an exotic, faraway place scrawled in the upper left corner: Tulsa, Minneapolis, Saratoga.

I wanted to share that thrill with these South African students, who are part of a weekend literacy program I coordinate in a low-income neighborhood called Alexandra. So I found teachers in Mexico and the United States whose students were keen to exchange letters with them.

Once the South African kids understood what this was all about, they were keen, too. (I am replacing their names with first initials to protect the privacy of minors.)

Dear Pen Pal,

Hi, my name is K. and I live in South Africa. I am 12 years old but turning 13. ... I love soccer! I’m actually really good at it, so it’s basically my talent! One thing I really don’t like is bubble gum. I don’t

like when people chew it aggressively.

Dear Pen Pal,

In my country we do many things like build robots, prank each other, and all other things. ... I don't like cheese and my favorite food is salad. Make up, I don't like it, sorry. And do you like running?

Dear Pen Pal,

People say that I am tall like a tower. I have huge eyes.

Dear Pen Pal,

A fun fact about me is that I am fun but at the very same time I am rude.

The students who wrote these letters are a dazzlingly multi-lingual crowd, natural storytellers who can toggle between three or four languages in the same conversation. But many have barely been taught to read. A quarter of those who speak Sepedi – one of the dominant languages in Alexandra – reach third grade unable to read a single word in any language. Eighty-one percent of South African fourth graders cannot understand the content of a simple text in English, according to a Progress in International Reading Literacy study.

The problem, needless to say, is not intelligence but lack of resources. Students who learn in overcrowded classrooms, with parents who can't help them with homework, quickly fall behind. Reading and writing can become a joyless slog.

Writing to someone on the other side of the world, though – that's interesting enough to bypass the boredom. Many of the students threw themselves into drafting and redrafting their letters until they were clear and readable. The end product wasn't always grammatically perfect, but for me, that was part of what made the letters so powerful. Here were kids on opposite sides of the world, pushing through the vulnerable act of writing in their second, third, or fourth language in order to forge a connection with each other.

"My favourite food is pizza," explained a 13-year-old in her opening letter. "Every time when we go to the mall with my mother, she always know that we don't come back without a pizza."

As we went, I explained that letters were a kind of written conversation. To keep it going, you had to ask questions. Luckily, the kids had many.

Do you eat meatballs?

What kind of phone are you using?

How do you say pink in your language?

Can you do a backflip?

Does your place have an ocean?

Are you magical and a dreamer?

On the other side of the world, their correspondents fired back with queries of their own:

Do you like to sleep?

Where do you buy make-up in South Africa?

How many kids are in your English class?

Do you believe that there is life after you die?

Does your name mean something?

If you could change something about your house, what would it be?

In my pen pal-ing times, you dropped your letter in a mailbox. But

South Africa's postal service has a well-earned reputation for losing mail, so I opted for a 21st-century hybrid approach. The children handwrote their letters. Their teachers and I swapped photos of them, then printed them for the kids to read, misspellings and all.

"I like so much mountain bicycle," explained a letter writer in Mexico. "One time I went to the mountain with friends and one friend falled in a very deep hole ... and it was very difficult to get him out of there."

The letters from Mexico arrived on graph paper, in a tight cursive that the South African students had never seen before. Much of the content was foreign, too. "What is ziplining?" someone asked me. "What is avocado toast?"

Meanwhile, some South African children wrote that their favorite foods were pap and *mogodu*, not realizing that their pen pal's mother wasn't cooking the same dishes for dinner: stiff cornmeal porridge and tripe stew for dinner.

But soon, the writers began to conjure their worlds for each other.

"Alexandra is a very noisy place, overcrowded but really fun and exciting, because you get to know a lot of people," one eighth grader in my class explained. "We really like to make our own words here, like when we want to say South Africa, we say 'South Ahhhh.'"

"I love going to the women's march," one student wrote. "On the 8th of march it is international day of women. Here in Mexico it is not so much a celebration, it is more of a fight for women to live without violence and have the same rights as men."

"My home is near an airport, so it gets noisy here sometimes," explained a high school senior in the United States. "I've lived here most of my life, though, so I'm used to the sounds of the airplanes. Does [Alexandra] get noisy too?"

And there were many pieces of childhood that transcended culture.

Kids in all three countries loved learning dances from TikTok and annoying their siblings. "You're right – KFC is delicious! affirmed one Mexican boy to his new South African friend."

In their letters, the children from each place wrote that they aspired to become doctors, lawyers, and pilots. "I want to be a You-Tuber and change the world," wrote a boy in Mexico.

Most of the exchanges fizzled quickly. Despite letters being exchanged virtually, the pace was glacial. There was spring break in one hemisphere, then winter break on the other. There were finals, field trips, cross-country meets.

"Hello, hope you're well," wrote a 10-year-old girl in South Africa. "I'm fine but terrified at the same time. We are about to write our June exams and I haven't started studying."

Students at the private school in Mexico wrote about ski holidays in France. Students in South Africa talked about going home to the village to see their grandmothers. Questions hung in the air, unanswered.

"I want to see how Mexico looks like and learn the languages you speak in your place," wrote an eighth grader in my group in her final letter. "I want us to be best pen pals and see each other when we grow up. Do you have brown hair?"

On both sides of the Atlantic, life moved on. And I was left with an international archive of childhood, in all its particularities and all its universality. There was, I could see clearly, so much more uniting the world's children than dividing them. ■

CAPTURING PURE JOY

I've photographed inside many classrooms over the decades. Somehow, there's always that one child who stands out. The youngest ones are my favorites. They aren't as self-conscious as tweens and teens. Emotions take hold of their faces in wonderful ways. I struck gold during this lesson at the John A. Reisenbach Charter School, in Harlem in New York City, in 2004. These first graders were acting out words like "hug" for a lesson on verbs. Creative teachers are the best for making my job easy.

– Melanie Stetson Freeman

A CHRISTIAN SCIENCE PERSPECTIVE

Continuing education

It's that time of year when the glossy catalogs showcasing my community's continuing education offerings have begun landing in mailboxes. With them usually comes a message about the lifelong opportunity to expand our horizons by learning new things.

How true that is – not just in subjects such as music and languages, but also in our spiritual progress. In fact, my practice of Christian Science has shown me that the truly horizon-expanding education isn't just in studying religion like an academic subject. It's in more deeply knowing and understanding God.

Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of this publication, was an ardent student of the Bible and found it indispensable to her spiritual search and eventual discovery of the Science of being, which she called Christian Science. But it was more than just the words of a spiritual text that impelled this paradigm-shifting sense of God to dawn for her. As she explained it, "The Scriptures had to me a new meaning, a new tongue. Their spiritual signification appeared; and I apprehended for the first time, in their spiritual meaning, Jesus' teaching and demonstration, and the Principle and rule of spiritual Science and metaphysical healing" ("Retrospection and Introspection," p. 25).

It was something beyond mere human insight or understanding that opened these vistas for Mrs. Eddy. It was a palpable, practical, *alive* sense of what God is and all that means for us as His children, not created materially, but spiritually. She experienced something of the living presence of God and that changed her – *healed* her. She then spent the rest of her life working to demonstrate, articulate, and teach this profound discovery so that the rest of us could likewise experience more of God, good, and the spiritual laws that undergird and govern our lives.

To those who asked how they could progress most rapidly in their own understanding, she left, in part, these instructions: "Study thoroughly the letter and imbibe the spirit" ("Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures," p. 495). In my life, I've come to see that as getting beyond the head to the heart. Not just learning and thinking about God, but reaching for more of an experience of God: to feel the love of God as Love, the life-sustaining power of God as Life, the harmonizing of God as Soul. To listen to, trust, and follow God because God is infinite intelligence, Mind.

Oftentimes, concepts that start out as interesting ideas that

I've gleaned from my study of the Bible and Science and Health take root and blossom as I ask God for help in getting a less academic, and more spiritual, sense of what they mean. For example, I spent a full year praying about what it means that God is Life. As I did, that idea went from feeling like notes on a page in a musical score to becoming like the music behind those notes – shimmering and singing to me in the most wonderful ways. At the end of that year, I even discovered that I didn't need to wear glasses anymore, just because I'd been perceiving more clearly that God is Life itself.

The continuing education that opens up new views of God to us has no season or registration deadline. It's there to be experienced daily, as we open our hearts and let God show us who He and we truly are.

– Jenny Sawyer

EDITORIALS

Parents in prison: Sustaining family bonds

The American corrections system is seeking to balance accountability with the right of children to parental care.

The steady growth in the number of women imprisoned in the United States in recent decades has drawn attention to the toll it places on public budgets – as well as on family and social stability.

New research in June showed it costs 25% to 75% more to hold a woman in prison, compared with the national annual average of \$70,000 per person. This is largely a function of fewer and smaller facilities for women, as well as outsourced healthcare.

But a cost that is not easily captured in dollar terms has begun to shift the emphasis in corrections systems from punitive to redemptive justice and detention: It's the cost in lost parental care and affection experienced by the more than 2.7 million children in the U.S. – half of them under 10 years of age – who have a parent in incarceration.

A child's need for parental presence, affection, and family stability has been well documented. Research also confirms that the negative impacts of a parent's absence are amplified when the imprisoned parent is a mother.

Acknowledging primary caregiving

"Women who come in contact with the criminal justice system are more likely than men to be parents and twice as likely as fathers to be the primary caretakers of their children," according to Anne Precythe, a former director of the Missouri Department of Corrections. "These women are central to their families' daily functioning – putting dinner on the table, taking children to school ... caring for elderly relatives," she wrote on the news site *Governing* in July.

The American justice system has shown an increasing willingness to meet the challenges of helping imprisoned caregivers fulfill their responsibilities to both society and their children. Most women in prison, Ms. Precythe pointed out, were not convicted of violent of-

fenses or new crimes but rather were there for probation or parole violations or court-ordered substance-use treatment.

Supporting parenting skills

“We can hold women accountable for breaking the law while using prison more judiciously,” Ms. Precythe observed.

More and more, facilities are offering simple, low-cost parenting education and skills programs that help both fathers and mothers. And nonprofits are working to support more frequent virtual and in-person visits by children that include meaningful interactions. These can involve reading a book together or a parent recording a book reading to send home.

Another approach, such as in Washington state, is alternative sentencing, which allows eligible parents to serve part or all of a sentence at home, under intensive community supervision or electronic monitoring.

Nurturing newborns

When it comes to mothers of very young children, co-residence or prison nursery programs are impactful – but still rare. An estimated 58,000 pregnant women enter jail or prison annually, and the vast majority of these new mothers are separated from their babies almost immediately after birth.

A 2025 report found that only eight state-run facilities operate such prison nurseries. Yet their positive effect is substantial: There was a 28% reduction in recidivism in Nebraska, while in Illinois, only 3% of the mothers returned to prison for new crimes. In addition, children who initially spend time closer to their mothers in prison nurseries exhibit better mental health and academic outcomes than infants who are separated from their mothers soon after delivery.

Such reforms are not just about restoring families but also about “breaking generational cycles of crime and punishment ... and building safer, healthier communities,” stated Oklahoma first lady Sarah Stitt. She was an adviser for a study last year by the Council on Criminal Justice that proposed alternatives to imprisonment for parents of young children.

Shared values

The director of the commission that produced the study, Stephanie Akhter, observed that “Safer communities, stronger families, more efficient policies and practices that are grounded in evidence and human dignity [are] ... shared values.”

The cornerstone of such values is a child’s right to uninterrupted care by a parent – the bond of love at the heart of a society’s harmony. ■

Finding liberty behind bars in China

One inspiring story in 2026 so far has been the unexpected release of a prominent religious leader in China by the country’s antireligion regime. After spending 266 days in prison, Ezra Jin Mingri, the Christian pastor of the underground Zion Church in Beijing, arrived in the United States on July 5. He and his family have since given two reasons for his sudden freedom.

The first is that Mr. Jin’s release was a result of prayer by many people around the world. “Thank you so much for everyone’s sup-

port and prayers. ... We truly witnessed a miracle and we are feeling so overwhelmed with joy,” his family wrote in a statement.

The second was less spiritual but perhaps the outcome of all those prayers. After citing “the miracle” of his newfound liberty, Mr. Jin credited a personal plea for his release by President Donald Trump during a May summit with Chinese leader Xi Jinping. Last month, the pastor told The Associated Press that Mr. Trump’s “unique diplomacy” had “results.”

Most news reports ran with that second reason – diplomacy. Yet, now, Mr. Jin is calling for more prayers to free other imprisoned Chinese Christians as well as similarly oppressed religious minorities, including Tibetan Buddhists and Muslim Uyghurs.

“My earnest prayer is that my release can mark the beginning of a new chapter for people of faith in China,” he wrote in The Wall Street Journal.

In the U.S., for now, Mr. Jin might find a receptive ear among most Americans for the unseen spiritual power that prayer evokes.

A 2023 survey found that more than 80% of adults in the U.S. believe that there is a “spiritual or supernatural” dimension to the world. About three-quarters believe in God or a higher power and express a desire to grow spiritually. A later survey found that a similar portion of Americans report praying weekly.

“A majority in our midst are open to tapping more deeply into their spiritual life,” concluded David Kinnaman, chief executive officer of Barna Group, which conducted the surveys.

During his nine-month captivity, Mr. Jin says he found that God gave him the strength for victory. “Even in the abyss, our hearts still look toward God’s temple,” he wrote in a letter from prison in November.

His meekness – Mr. Jin preaches obedience to secular authority – attests to a spiritual reality rarely reported by a news media focused mainly on the mere physical. Yet his tale reveals another realm of thought capable of healing and reconciliation. As he wrote from prison, citing a letter by the Apostle Paul: “God works all things together for good to those who love him.” ■

CULTURE

TULSA, OKLA.

In an age of hybrid work, an old road gets a new twist

Route 66 encouraged movement. Now, Tulsa invites people who can work anywhere to settle down.

By Harry Bruinius / Staff writer

Angela Harris needed to start her life anew.

It was a daunting task to even consider, she knew. She was approaching 50, living once again in Houston, the city where she was born and raised. In the five years since her husband died, she had lost the sense of who she was, and needed to find it somewhere else.

“It was like an urgency,” says Ms. Harris, a senior compliance officer. “I said, ‘I can’t stay here. I have to go.’”

Work would not hold her back. She had a good job with a good

salary, and worked remotely, so she had the freedom to live almost anywhere she wanted.

She was joining a distinctly 21st-century American migration. A century after Route 66 carried generations toward jobs, opportunity, and imagined futures farther down the road, remote work had reversed the old bargain for a small but durable class: They could take the job with them and choose the place where they hoped to begin again.

Among the dozens of American places with incentives inviting workers like Ms. Harris to settle was a city where, 100 years ago, a businessman helped christen Route 66 as “the Main Street of America.”

“Ready to turn a page”

Tulsa, Oklahoma, once, was a place you might pass through. Justin Harlan spent years trying to give strangers a reason to stay. Born in Tulsa, raised outside Kansas City, he came back for college and never left. As a recruiter for Teach For America in Oklahoma, he would ask graduates to stay two years in a place most knew nothing about. But he noticed something.

“Tulsa was always at the top of the list in terms of teachers staying beyond two years,” he says. “The barrier was often just getting someone to give it a chance.”

Tulsa Remote, which Mr. Harlan has run since 2021, is that observation turned into organized effort. Founded in 2018 by the George Kaiser Family Foundation, in a city trying to loosen its dependence on oil and gas, it pays remote workers \$10,000 to live in Tulsa for a year. The money does not buy a resident. It buys a trial. More than 4,200 people have taken it; about 80% are still there two years on.

They arrive with jobs in hand, which Mr. Harlan calls the fairness of it. “You’re not taking away from a local,” he says. Not everyone who applies is accepted, and the average salary of those who arrive is around \$100,000. What it mostly selects for is people at a hinge: “Folks experiencing some sort of major life change. Ready to turn a page.”

More people can pursue this change today without looking for a new job – untethering geography from employment. Rebecca Hinds began a doctorate on remote work at Stanford in September 2019, when it was an odd thing to study. But within six months, the whole country was her laboratory.

Before the pandemic, remote workers were stigmatized, she says – passed over, presumed to be slacking. Then the offices emptied and everyone was on the same screen. “For the first time, many of these remote workers felt a sense of leveling,” she says.

Roughly 12% of full-time American employees work entirely from home – more than double what it was before the pandemic, but still far less than what many predicted five years ago. Hybrid work turned out to be the durable change, and about 25% split time between home and office.

This past July, Mr. Harlan and Dr. Hinds joined a new body devoted to the question their two careers turn on. The Remote Work Institute, a partnership between Tulsa Remote and the London School of Economics and Political Science, was launched to study remote work – an attempt, its founders say, to replace a debate driven by anecdote and headline with evidence.

“Who am I now?”

The freedom Ms. Harris had to move and reinvent herself offered possibility and promise, but carried sorrow within it.

Her husband, Desmond, was a fashion photographer from New Orleans. She worked for a publishing company. They dated, then began to collaborate. Their relationship deepened, and they started a project: He was going to photograph firefighters and police officers in small American towns and she would sell them to book publishers.

“So we literally were in a vehicle, coast to coast, border to border, doing what we loved,” Ms. Harris says. For five years, they were co-workers, travel companions, husband and wife in a rhythm of joy and striving.

They fell ill with COVID-19 at the same time and went to the hospital together, and one day the nurses said they were moving Desmond to a different room. An hour later he was gone.

“For nine months, I did absolutely nothing,” she says. “I was just existing.”

Then her daughter from a previous marriage was pregnant with her first grandchild, so she moved back to Houston. Then her elderly father’s health faltered. For a while, she was useful to others. At her father’s funeral, she understood she was going to leave. Much in her deepest self remained in turmoil.

“Right after Desmond passed away, I immediately started asking myself, ‘Who am I now?’” Ms. Harris says. “I mean, I know who I am, but who am I now?”

She had heard that some places were paying remote workers to move. She considered West Virginia and Colorado. Tulsa was a few hours up the highway, a city she had driven through once with Desmond.

So about two years ago, she rented an apartment sight unseen and loaded a moving truck, the first she had ever driven, got on the road, and headed north.

“I see colors on this canvas”

Not long after she arrived, Ms. Harris shaved her head – an act of freedom, she says, in a city where no one had known her before.

Then a stranger told her about a beauty pageant. “I’m in a ‘Why not?’ phase of my life,” she says. In March she flew to Maryland for the 2026 Ms. Bald & Beautiful Pageant, which honors women who are bald or losing their hair, and found the company she had been missing.

“I don’t see a lot of bald women” in Tulsa, she says. “To hear their stories and find your tribe – it was more than a pageant.”

One category asked contestants to represent their city. Ms. Harris, still new to Tulsa, chose Greenwood – Black Wall Street, the district a white mob burned in 1921 – and took from it, she says, resilience, the work of continuing to show people who you are.

For the talent portion, she delivered a monologue to her late husband – thanking him, she says, “for letting me know that beauty is not in what I wear, but who I am.” She was named first runner-up. Her trophy sits in her apartment window, facing out.

Her story is what Justin Harlan and his city hope to see: Someone agrees to try Tulsa, and finds something they were looking for.

Ms. Harris does not yet feel settled, and does not intend to be. She renews the lease a year at a time; if a chance came to go overseas, she would take it. But she’s decided to stay a third year in Tulsa for now.

When she arrived, “I felt like I was just a blank canvas,” Ms. Harris says. “And I had these watercolors, but no direction. ... It’s been good since I’ve been here. I see colors on this canvas now that once was empty.” ■

The 1909 auto race that sealed Americans' love of cars

"The Hardest, Longest Race" takes readers on a wild jaunt across the country, on roads that could hardly live up to the name.

By Danny Heitman / Contributor

As gasoline prices soar and inflation nips at vacation budgets, many travelers may have rethought the prospect of the Great American Road Trip. But in "The Hardest, Longest Race," a charming account of a topsy-turvy automotive contest that captured the national imagination, author Eric Moskowitz reminds readers that getting behind the wheel in 1909 had its challenges, too.

That's the year when millionaire M. Robert Guggenheim staged a contest to see which motorists could travel most quickly between New York City and Seattle, which seemed an ideal finish point because it was hosting a world's fair. The course zigzagged more than 4,100 miles across the continent – a formidable journey, though one that many cars today could handle without a hiccup. But autos were precarious contraptions at the start of the 20th century, and America's national system of roads was little more than a faint scribble on the map. When Guggenheim summoned contestants to the starting line on the first day of June outside City Hall in Manhattan, only four car companies – Acme, Ford, Shawmut, and Itala – dared to show up. Henry Ford hedged his bets by entering two of his Model Ts in the race.

Though Ford remains a global brand, few readers will recall Shawmut or Acme, and their brief moment is also part of Moskowitz's story. As he explains, America had 253 automakers in 1909. It was a precursor of sorts to today's Silicon Valley startup culture, in which a million entrepreneurial flowers bloom, with many quickly withering on the vine. Interestingly, Moskowitz learned the scale of the automotive sector all those decades ago by consulting a period survey meant to drum up congressional support for tariffs.

That tidbit seems like something pulled from this morning's headlines, but in many other ways, "The Hardest, Longest Race" reveals a time sharply different from our own. Race contestants could buy gas at a now-enviable 15 cents a gallon, but filling stations were a rarity. Some motorists replenished their tanks at hardware stores, where gas was often ladled from a barrel.

Speed limits of the day seemed similarly improvised. In Ohio, drivers could go no more than "eight miles per hour in densely settled districts, fifteen in outlying areas, and twenty in the country, with an added requirement to slow near any horse and to stop fully if the person with the horse signaled you to do so."

American transportation was still largely equestrian. When President William Howard Taft asked Congress to fund the first White House limousines, one member of Congress dismissed automobiles as "a genuine all-around nuisance" and advised the president to get some mules instead.

Mules still seemed better suited to much of the era's transportation grid. When local journalists in Ohio tagged along for part of the 1909 race after a spell of rain, "the Maumee Pike macadam was a mess," Moskowitz tells readers. "The newspapermen clung to their seats 'over

roads flooded and over bumps that threatened a hundred times to hurl the drivers into the ditches.'"

Moskowitz often quotes from community newspapers along the race route – many no longer around, though their lively legacy happily endures in digital archives. Their content is a reminder that scribes more than a century ago often had a flair for colorful language. It's a sense of whimsy that Moskowitz, a former Boston Globe reporter, embraces in his own prose. Here's how he playfully describes the race's sponsor: "An Edwardian dandy of gleaming stickpins and crisp club collars, Guggenheim sported a dusting of beard, a straw boater, and a lapel carnation as big as a saucer."

This is a fun and fizzy book. The quixotic odyssey at its center, with its hairpin turns and madcap improvisations, can seem like something sketched out by Jules Verne.

The subtitle of "The Hardest, Longest Race" bills it as "the cross-country contest that changed America." The premise sounds oversold, especially since the end of the race was something of a fizzle. One of Ford's Model T's initially landed in first place, but the victors were later disqualified because Ford's team hadn't followed the rules.

Moskowitz's book is a timely reminder that though some of the American romance with cars might be fading, we're in what could be the golden age of automotive history books. Witold Rybczynski's "The Driving Machine" and Brian C. Black's "Ike's Road Trip" count as memorable recent examples, and "The Hardest, Longest Race" is a worthy addition to the mix. ■

IN PICTURES

After a long war, Syrians scale new heights

Story by Adri Salido / Contributor

MONTE ROSA, SYRIA

On a weekend morning, a van leaves Damascus and clambers toward Monte Rosa, a rocky area on the outskirts of the Syrian capital. Everyone is laughing and talking, eagerly anticipating a day of climbing. For some, it will be the first time climbing outdoors; for others, it marks a return to a sport they discovered years earlier, in exile, while a protracted civil war tore apart their country.

Ropes, harnesses, and helmets are laid out at the base of the limestone cliff. Children, young people, and adults listen as organizers explain how to tie knots, trust the rope, and move safely on the rock wall. In a country where war reshaped daily life, the simple act of climbing becomes something larger: a way to regain confidence, reconnect with nature, and share a moment of joy.

Siblings Moaz, Yasseen, and Zahira Tasabehji organized the trip as part of a climbing project they founded, known as Jabalna (Arabic for "our mountain"). The three had left Syria in 2010 as teens and spent 15 years in Canada, where they built new lives and discovered climbing. After the fall of Bashar al-Assad in December 2024, they returned to Damascus and began building a climbing community.

Jabalna opened its climbing gym – the first in the capital – in January 2026, operating on a discounted access system. Children participate alongside adults. Experienced climbers guide beginners. Women and girls are encouraged to take part. A national climbing

association was also created, and outdoor climbing sites across the country are under development.

"It is somehow really special to climb the rocks of my home," says participant Omar Moussa.

During the war, Hiba Askar fled with her family to Lebanon, where she discovered climbing. Now back in Syria, Ms. Askar helps guide newcomers on the rock. "To climb in my own country now means hope, rebuilding, and creating opportunities for a new generation to feel strong and free, too," she says.

As the sun starts to drop over Monte Rosa, the group gathers again at the base of the rock. Some are tired; others ask for one more climb. Ropes get packed up, helmets are collected, and the van begins to head back to Damascus.

Outdoor climbing in Syria still comes with serious challenges. Landmines make some areas unsafe. Equipment is difficult to import, and many guidebooks are outdated.

But whether climbing can help Syrians rebuild after war is an open question. For now, the answer each weekend starts with a rope, a hand on the rock, and the decision to go up. ■

SUDOKU

Sudoku difficulty: ★☆☆☆☆

1	9				3			7
	7		9	4			1	3
			2			9		
7		5						2
	3	1	6	8	2		9	
9						1	6	4
8				2	6			
2			8			6	4	1
		9	7		4	3		

How to do Sudoku

Fill in the grid so the numbers 1 through 9 appear just once in each column, row, and three-by-three block.

Crossword and Sudoku solutions

Y	K	S		L	R	W	A		S	G	T
D	M	A		L	E	T			A	S	T
D	R	E		S	E	N	O	T	S	E	M
E	A	T		K	S		N		I	A	
				R	A	E	Y		S	O	H
S				O	P	A	T	R	I	C	H
G				S		L	I	L	A	C	
G				N	O	S		A	L	L	C
U				V	A	G		V	I	S	
S				N	E	D					
S				S	T				I	N	T
E				R	A	E					
A				W							

8	2	3	4	5	7	9	1	6
1	4	6	9	3	8	7	5	2
9	7	5	2	6	1	3	4	8
4	6	1	5	3	8	2	7	9
5	9	2	8	7	6	1	4	3
7	3	8	1	4	9	5	6	2
6	5	4	9	1	8	3	2	7
3	8	4	2	1	7	9	5	6
5	7	6	9	4	8	2	1	3
1	9	2	5	6	3	4	8	7

Crossword

ACROSS

1. Arctic surface
4. Ferrous metal
8. On vacation, perhaps
12. ___ Faithful
13. Chignon's site
14. Beef order
15. Chase game
16. Fascinations
18. Very skilled
20. Bear's hibernation spot
21. Tourist's entry permit
24. Lacking details
28. Yells and whistles?
32. Album track
33. Decorator's choice
34. Fragrant blossom
36. Performer's booking
37. Back scratcher target
39. Defenders of the country
41. Pacific salmon
43. 52 weeks
44. Actor Ziering
46. Do figure eights
50. Ritzy rocks
55. Fire engine's color
56. Rigging attachment
57. Bluish duck
58. TV's "___About You"
59. Liner movers
60. Lopsided
61. Cloud backdrop

1	2	3		4	5	6	7		8	9	10	11
12				13					14			
15				16				17				
18			19				20					
			21		22	23		24		25	26	27
28	29	30					31		32			
33				34				35		36		
37			38		39				40			
41				42		43						
			44		45			46		47	48	49
50	51	52				53	54			55		
56					57					58		
59					60					61		

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DOWN

1. Trivial bit
2. Robed
3. Boundary
4. Laverne's L, e.g.
5. Scooted
6. Decide
7. Prerequisite
8. Concert venues
9. Existed once
10. Class with crayons
11. Agreeable answer
17. Make go "vroom"
19. Pipe material
22. Pillowcase
23. Calm
25. Belinda Carlisle, for one
26. Cohesive entity
27. Breakfast staple
28. High-style
29. Biographical start?
30. Georgia ___ (Atlanta university)
31. Completely fill
35. Indelicately
38. Elevates
40. Drive bananas
42. Minded Junior
45. ___ bene (pay close attention)
47. An octopus' eight
48. Patio furniture wood
49. Christian Science founder
50. Old intl. clock standard
51. ___ de toilette
52. Chinese food flavoring
53. Mint-condition
54. Musical bent