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A View from the Teacher's Desk
By Stephen Ritz

After more than 18 very long months stuck inside our houses tethered to our screens, is there anyone who isn't excited about going back to school? As a lifelong educator, I'm ready to jump over my desk and dance with my students. I'm ready to high five my families, kiss the custodians, hug the homeroom teachers, and fist bump the food service professionals.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, we've heard the refrain "build back better." It's time to abandon an idea of a "return to normal." Instead, we need to aim beyond "just surviving" to inclusively thriving. The question is: Are we ready to do the work?

We've known the problems forever. COVID just made them far more profound. COVID was, and still is, universal: we all feel it, we are all living it – some more than others. But nobody can deny that the collective lived experience is universal. For students, it's tough to even think about schoolwork or homework when they're worried about having food to eat or who around them is going to die next.

One of the first places trauma manifests is school: children are the canaries, and our schools are the coal mines. Every societal issue from home life to health explodes in schools. The upside: schools are also the most fertile ground for regenerative change and both community and personal transformation. U.S. public schools have been under scrutiny for decades, yet they remain the single greatest lever this nation has to achieve equity and end poverty for all. Now is the time for students to view the world through the lens of possibilities and to live in solutions, not the triage ward.

U.S. Congressman Jamaal Bowman is championing the [Green New Deal for Public Schools](#)—an idea long overdue as long underserved schools crumble, corrode, and collapse around us. The goal of this bold legislation is to invest \$1.43 trillion over 10 years in our nation's public schools and infrastructure to combat climate change.

In the Bronx, where I've lived and worked for decades, schools are the most vital organs, the epicenters, the very lifeblood of our communities. Everyone respects schools as sacred spaces. We now need to treat them as such. Every child deserves clean air, drinkable water, natural light, healthy food, and a school in which they can dream of and work towards a better, brighter future.

It's time we begin unpacking the decades of neglect. Separate and unequal is no longer acceptable. Windows that don't open, toilets that don't flush, food that is neither healthy nor nutritious – these are relics of the past. It's time to relegate them the scrap heap.

How many generations of students must we lose to these ills and injustices? We have a chance and a choice to reclaim this generation of students and make sure we never lose another child to poverty and despair. It's time to do the hard work. Let compassion be our new curriculum and collective empathy be our new North Star.

The mandate is simple: education not asphyxiation. It's time to breathe life into all that we do. Imagine teachers NOT having to spend their time advocating for drinkable water, mold-free hallways, operable windows, clean air, and temperate classrooms. For our students to be well-fed by the time we all walk into class together, every morning. Instead, we teachers could focus on what's actually important: inspiring America's students and teaching the next generation to take on the challenges we face. We would be living in the solution.

A lifelong educator and highly effective and successful middle school principal, Representative Bowman knows from whence he speaks. So, too, our First Lady, Dr. Jill Biden, who understands the power and promise of public education, of workforce development, of polytechnical training. President Joe Biden's agenda thinks beyond the next barrel of oil, the next truckful of coal, and next quarterly earnings statement. He champions investing in the American people, especially children, to end poverty and revive the middle class. Let us remember that promise, let us embrace that purpose.

Better schools, better communities, better infrastructure, better opportunities. That's what people are waiting for when schools open. It all starts with students equipped to envision and enable the future. High performing schools change everything for everyone. Rather than survive, we will thrive.

Beyond engagement, let's move towards fulfillment. The eyes of the future are looking back at us and demanding that we get it right. This is our collective moment. If we don't evolve, we are all doomed to fail.

Will we be bold enough?

It's time to treasure our children, treasure our teachers, and treasure our collective and inclusive potential. It's time to embrace our better nature. With dreams begin responsibilities.

Let's not waste this moment.

[Stephen Ritz](#) is an internationally acclaimed educator, author of "[The Power Of A Plant](#)" and founder of [Green Bronx Machine](#) and the National Health, Wellness and Learning Center at CS 55 in the Bronx. He also is a News12 Education Ambassador.