**Please Don’t Put Cameras In Classrooms**

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Some terrible ideas in education wash ashore like the tide. They crash and bubble onto the sand, exposing themselves momentarily to light and air, only to recede back into the deep. Then, after a time, the moon waxes and wanes, pushing them back onto the beach. They are exposed again and recede again without ever actually gaining a grip on the firmament.

Putting cameras in classrooms is one such idea. Even a moment’s reflection should surface a proverbial Zanclean Flood of negative consequences, both intended and unintended. And yet, like the tide swelling in and out, every so often someone says we should do it.

Let’s walk through just a few of the problems with such a proposal. First, there are the privacy concerns. Any videos of classrooms would have footage of children. It shouldn’t have to be said, but I guess it must be, that we should be incredibly careful about what we do with video footage of children.

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Think about tapping into a livestream of a classroom, or watching a recording, even for totally innocuous reasons. Let’s say your child is in the class and you want to see what they learned that day. Well, in watching what your child was doing, you’d also see what my child was doing. Maybe she was struggling to read something that day, which could be embarrassing to show people outside of the classroom. Maybe she shared something privately with the teacher that the video camera picked up. Or, maybe, I don’t want you to watch video of my kid for any reason at all. How about that?

Second, we don’t want teachers to play to the camera. Think of this as the Senate confirmation hearing-ization of the classroom. If you’ve ever watched a confirmation hearing at length, you quickly start to realize that Senators aren’t talking to the nominee, or even to their fellow senators. They are speaking to the audience at home. This is why there are very few questions, and mostly statements, and the questions that are asked are more of the variety designed to provoke a reaction that can be clipped for social media rather than to elicit a useful response.

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The very same thing would happen in the classroom. Rather than seeing their students as their audience and trying to develop lessons and tasks that would bring out the best in them, teachers would be encouraged to think about how best to perform for the parents at home. It would incentivize performative acts, projects, readings, and the like, not the careful formative work that should take place in a classroom. Or, on the flipside, it would encourage bland and inoffensive lessons that bore children to tears, but never run the risk of ever offending anyone anywhere. Real formative work relies on trial and error, patience, mistakes and corrections, none of which make for great video.

Third, and perhaps glaringly obvious, it’s insulting to teachers. Other professionals are not treated this way. I don’t have a live feed of my accountant doing my taxes. Even other public servants like public defenders, judges, and social workers do almost all or all of their work outside the scope of closed-circuit cameras. And, at least according to our polling, north of 85% of parents report that they already trust teachers to make good decisions. Is this a solution in search of a problem? Even if it isn’t, who on earth would want to work in such a fishbowl?

Transparency is a worthy goal. Parents should know what is going on in their child’s classroom. They should know what books their children are reading, what activities they are doing, and what is on their assessments. But there are so many ways to collect and convey that information shy of dropping cameras into classrooms.

What we’re really talking about here is trust. And the question is, how can we build trust between teachers and parents? Video surveillance ain’t it.

The real solution is transparency plus choice. That is, schools and teachers should be transparent about what they are teaching and why. They should be encouraged to have a distinct ethos and to make the instructional choices that they think are best for kids. Everyone involved should be clear about what is going on. Schools and teachers should set up channels to regularly communicate with parents. And then, parents should have the freedom to choose that school or not based on that information. That will be a foundation upon which trust can develop. No one is being coerced. No one is trying to hide anything. Everyone starts on the same team.

Schools are not going to work well if teachers are being constantly micromanaged. There needs to be trust between parents and teachers to allow them the freedom to do their jobs well. The best way to build that trust is by creating clear frameworks for sharing what is going on in schools and classrooms and then empowering parents to make choices about where their kids go to school.

Let the idea of putting cameras in the classroom float out over the horizon one last time, never to be seen again.