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Schools Are Not Cool
By SARA MOSLE



As temperatures rise, life will become more unpleasant for teachers and students in New York City schools, which remain open through June 26, and many of which do not have air-conditioning. In New York roughly a third of public school classrooms lack this basic amenity; in other major cities, especially in poorer districts, the figures are comparable or worse.

My first year as a public school teacher, I taught at Manhattan's P.S. 98, which did not have air-conditioning. From mid-May until June's end — roughly 17 percent of the school year — the temperature in my classroom hovered in the 80s and often topped 90 degrees.

Students wilted over desks. Academic gains evaporated. Even restless pencil tappers and toe wigglers grew lethargic. Absenteeism increased as children sought relief at home or outdoors. By day's end, my hair was plastered to my face with perspiration.

It seems obvious: schools need to be cool. It's absurd to talk about inculcating 21st-century skills in classrooms that resemble 19th-century sweatshops.

Yet, when teachers or parents complain about a lack of air-conditioning, they often get back the Grumpy Grandpa Defense, which sounds something like this, "Grandpa went to school during the Great Depression. Grandpa didn't have air-conditioning. Grandpa did fine. So why are all these spoiled kids complaining?"

This is essentially the argument Mayor Michael Bloomberg made last June, when a seasonal heat wave — funny how they arrive like clockwork — led to complaints about sweltering classrooms just as children were taking all-important end-of-year exams. When asked by a reporter about the stifling conditions, the mayor testily replied, “I suspect if you talk to everyone in this room, not one of them went to a school where they had air-conditioning.”

Meanwhile, city officials advised the young and elderly to seek cool shelter or face health consequences.

Cool schools are critical if we are to boost achievement. Studies show that concentration and cognitive abilities decline substantially after a room reaches 77 or 78 degrees. This is a lesson American businesses learned long ago. As Stan Cox wrote in “Losing Our Cool,” his book on our global dependence on air-conditioning, “The American office is, by definition, a refrigerated workplace.” A pleasant atmosphere leads to more productive employees.

Air-conditioning is, in fact, so pervasive in American offices that a common complaint among workers is not that cubicles are too hot but that they are too cold. It isn’t just white-collar laborers who work in cool climates. Amazon announced last year that it was spending \$52 million to upgrade its warehouses with air-conditioning. Yet we can’t seem to do the same for vulnerable children, though some of the achievement gap is most likely owing to a lack of air-conditioning. One Oregon study found that students working in three different temperature settings had strikingly different results on exams, suggesting that sweating a test actually undermines performance.

Students who enjoy the luxury of air-conditioning may enjoy an unfair advantage over their hotter peers.

We are also investing enormous sums to extend the school day and school year in many locales. But these investments won’t be effective if schools are ovens.

There is one rationale, however, for resisting cooling our nation’s classrooms. As Mr. Cox wrote, air-conditioning is a global environmental disaster that contributes mightily to greenhouse gases and climate change. Some scientists theorize that it may even be contributing to the nation’s obesity epidemic. So, how do we balance the needs of Mother Earth with those of her children?

It’s time we introduced not just a Race to the Top but also a Race for the Cool. Let’s create financial incentives to reward schools that find new green solutions for keeping classrooms in the temperate zone. Schools are natural incubators of reform, and the resulting experimentation could become a continuing lesson for children, even part of the national science curriculum.

We have the Intel Science Talent Search, in which private laboratories, nonprofits and leading universities work hand in hand with the nation's top students. Why not harness this same energy for a nationwide Science Fair devoted to helping schools chill?

Schools that designed alternative energy solutions — wind-powered classrooms or grassy roof gardens that naturally lower building temperatures — would receive the financing to upgrade their facilities.

This would not only spur innovation but also generate jobs, all the while helping to save the planet and foster environments where more children can learn.