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BUILDING
SCHOOL CULTURE

RECONNECT

for MEANING, PURPOSE,
and BELONGING

▶ VIDEOS INCLUDED

Uncommon Schools | Change History.

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RECONNECT

Building School Culture for Meaning, Purpose, and Belonging

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*To all of our colleagues who have given
so much on behalf of students during an unprecedented
time.*

Acknowledgments

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See what the Teach Like a Champion team is up to at teachlikeachampion.org.

Introduction: What's the Problem?

After successive school years disrupted by masks, isolations, and mass experiments in remote teaching, educators at last returned to school last year to find that classrooms and students had changed.

In the first days of the return, perhaps we didn't see this fully. Yes, most of us knew that there would be yawning academic gaps. Most of us understood what the data have since clearly borne out: that despite often heroic efforts at remote instruction, the result has been a massive setback in learning and academic progress, with the costs levied most heavily on those who could least afford it,[1] and that it will take years, not months, to make up the loss. But at least we were all together again. We were on the road back.

As the days passed, though, a troubling reality emerged.

The students who came back had spent long periods away from peers, activities, and social interactions. For many young people—and their teachers—the periods of isolation had been difficult emotionally and psychologically. Some had lost loved ones, while others had to endure months in a house or apartment while everything they valued—tennis or track or drama or music, not to mention moments of sitting informally among friends and laughing—had suddenly evaporated from their lives.

Even if they had not experienced the worst of the pandemic, most were out of practice at the expectations, courtesies, and give-and-take of everyday life. Their social skills had declined. They looked the same—or at least we presumed they did behind the masks—but some seemed troubled and distant; some struggled to concentrate and

follow directions. Some didn't know how to get along. They were easily frustrated and quick to give up. Not all of them, of course, but on net there was a clear trend. The media was suddenly full of stories of discipline problems, chronic disruptions, and historic levels of student absences. In schools where no one had ever had to think about how to deal with a fight, they burst into the open like brushfires.

At the time we needed good teaching the most, it was suddenly very difficult to accomplish, and young people seemed troubled and anxious. It didn't help that we were short-staffed, straining just to get classes covered. In the end it's possible that the first post-pandemic year was harder than the pandemic years themselves. The students who came back were not the students we'd had before the pandemic.

But, we argue, the story is more complex than it appeared even then. What had happened in the lives of our students wasn't just a protracted once-in-a-generation adverse event, but the combined effects of several large-scale, ground-shifting trends reshaping the fabric of students' lives. These events had begun before the pandemic, but they were often exacerbated by it. Their combined effects are significant, and probably not fully reversible. We can't turn back the clock. But they should cause us to plan and design our schools and classrooms differently going forward—not just for a year or two of "recovery" but perhaps more permanently.

In this introduction, we'll examine three unprecedented problems our young people face: 1) a crisis of mental health amid rising screen time, 2) a lack of trust in institutions, and 3) the challenge of balancing the benefits individualism with the benefits of collective endeavor in institutions that rely heavily on social contracts. We should note that this book is not all doom and gloom: the rest of it

will be focused on solutions to the issues we describe. And we believe the solutions are out there. But first we have to be clear-eyed about where we stand.

A PANDEMIC WITHIN AN EPIDEMIC

Even before the pandemic, the psychologist Jean Twenge had found spiraling dosages of depression, anxiety, and isolation among teens. "I had been studying mental health and social behavior for decades and I had never seen anything like it," Twenge wrote in her 2017 book *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood*.

This historic decline in the psychological well-being of young people coincided almost exactly with the precipitous rise of the smartphone and social media and more specifically with the moment when the proportion of social media users was high enough that any teenagers wishing to have normal social life no longer had an alternative but to become users themselves. It also coincided with the moment in time when the "Like" button was added to social media apps. As a result, social media use became far more compulsive and users far more dependent.

"The arrival of the smartphone has radically changed every aspect of teenagers' lives, from the nature of their social interactions to their mental health," Twenge and co-author Jonathan Haidt wrote in the *New York Times*.[2] "It's harder to strike up a casual conversation in the cafeteria or after class when everyone is staring down at a phone. It's harder to have a deep conversation when each party is interrupted randomly by buzzing, vibrating 'notifications.'" They quote the psychologist Sherry Turkle, who notes that we are, now, "forever elsewhere."

By the time Twenge published *iGen,* screen media use had doubled in ten years—across gender, race, and class—from an hour a day to two.[3]

TRENDS IN MEDIA USE
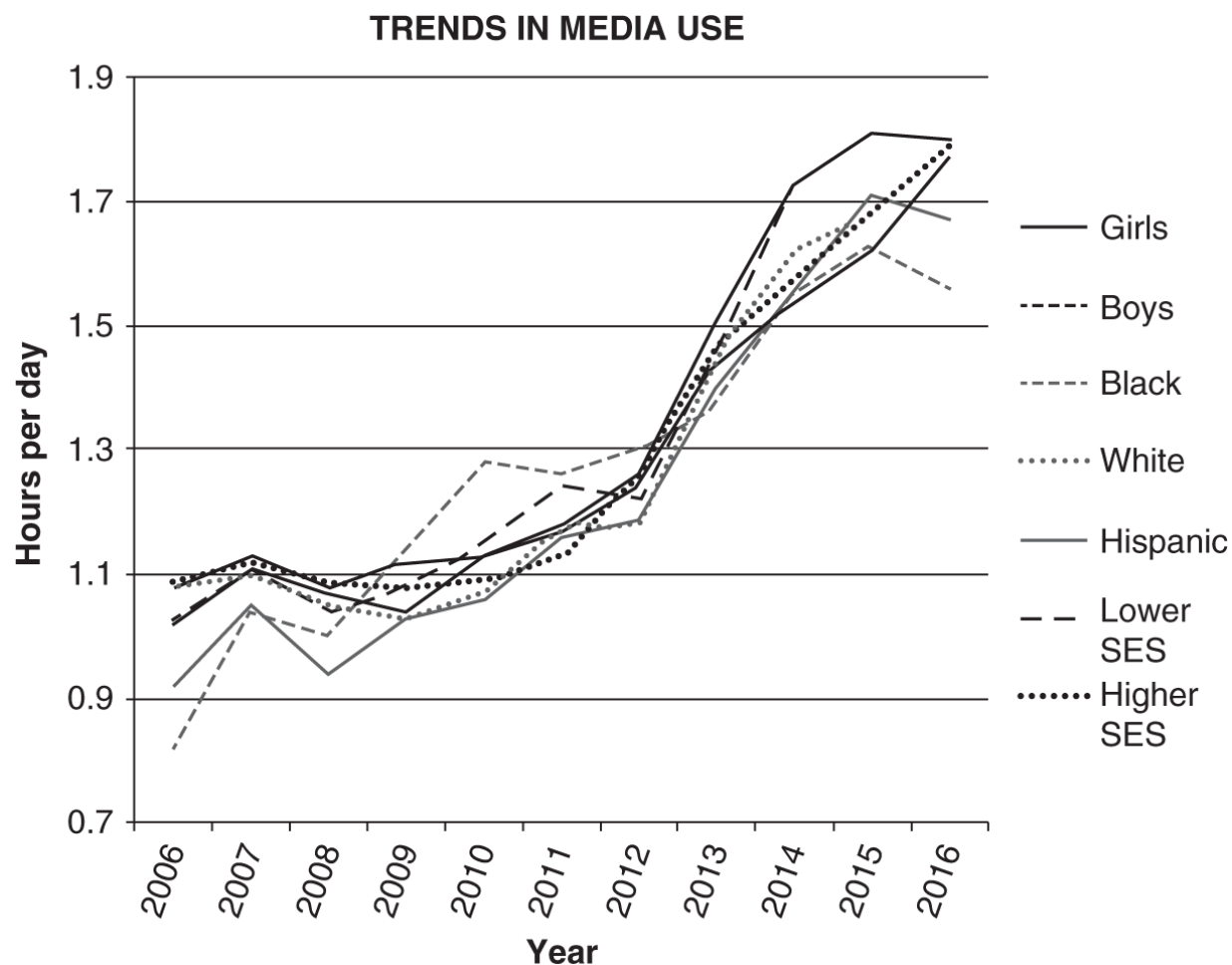
By this point 97% of 12th graders (and 98% of 12th-grade girls) were then using social media. It was "about as universal an experience as you can get," Twenge noted. And these data predate the newest and most addictive social media apps, such TikTok, which was released in 2016 and whose influence is not fully reflected in it. But the results were still plenty alarming. Twenge and Haidt found that across 37 countries, teenage loneliness, which had been "relatively stable between 2000 and 2012, with fewer than 18% reporting high levels of loneliness," suddenly spiked as smartphones and social media proliferated. "In

the six years after 2012, they wrote, "rates…roughly doubled in Europe, Latin America and the English-speaking countries."

This was already an epidemic reshaping every aspect of teen's lives. As the following chart shows, the average 12th grader in 2016 went out with friends less often than the average 8th grader ten years before, Twenge pointed out. Instead of hanging out at the shopping mall, meeting up at a McDonalds, or cruising around in cars, they were in their rooms interacting on social media (or gaming, especially if they are boys). And even when they were "out and about" they were often not fully present.

Going out without parents

Times per week

2.9

2.6

2.3

2

1.7

1976 1978 1980 1982 1984 1986 1988 1990 1992 1994 1996 1998 2000 2002 2004 2006 2008 2010 2012 2014 2016

— 12th-graders
— 10th-graders
— 8th-graders

2007: iphone released

2011: iphone normalcy
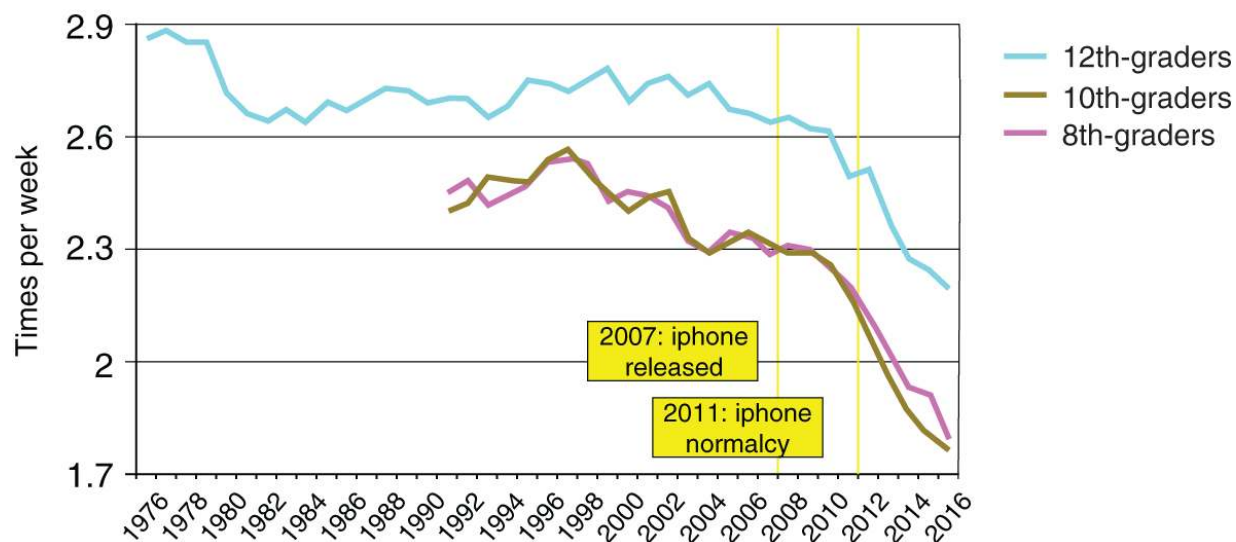
The tendency of young people to socialize online and from their rooms instead of in person has had a wide variety of consequences—both good and bad, Twenge is careful to point out. Far fewer had sex, drank, or used drugs. The teenage pregnancy rate dropped to its lowest in decades. Teenagers became less likely to die in car accidents. But they didn't learn the responsibility and social skills you get from being out in public—having a job, doing volunteer work, meeting new people, learning to drive, even going to

parties. (By the way, they did not spend any more time doing homework, in case you're wondering, which suggests that the common theory that school-related workload was the source of rising mental health issues is not likely true.) The number of young people who got insufficient sleep increased to unprecedented levels. And most of all, and far most importantly, rates of depression, anxiety, loneliness, and even suicide spiked suddenly to all-time highs, at rates Twenge had never seen the equal of.

Meanwhile, young people's intellectual lives were changing too. In competition with the cell phone and social media, the idea of reading a book for pleasure had all but disappeared. As recently as 1996, half of teens regularly read for pleasure; by 2017, only one teen in ten did. And reading had become a different activity. Those teens who did read mostly did so not as older generations did—via deep immersion in another world, with sustained empathy-building experiences and little interruption, for long periods of time—but as they do other activities: with their cell phones by their side interrupting them every few seconds with a "push" message. Their internal narrative, the one in which they discover why the caged bird sings, is mixed with equal amounts of reflection on what is up with the Kardashians and "Dude, where R you?? We R Over @ Byrons!"

Young people had traded social relationships for virtual ones, but at a high cost. The nature of virtual interactions conducted on social media is engineered by a third party—app creators—whose purpose is not to create true connection but dependence. As a result, even social acceptance on social media can be problematic. The Like button (first added to social media platforms in 2009) in particular is designed to manipulate our desire to connect socially to create product addiction. It creates "short-term, dopamine-driven feedback loops."[4] Getting a like

communicates social approval and inclusion to us. This releases a bit of the same brain chemical (dopamine) released by other pleasurable activities. Social media algorithms ensure that the tiny chemical dividend is released on a *variable unpredictable reward schedule*: you don't know when and whether you will get the little burst of well-being that comes with a like; its schedule is unpredictable so you are socialized to constantly check for it. Such feedback loops highjack our evolutionary desire for social inclusion and translate it into digital currency. For teens, whose need for validation and affirmation is especially high, it makes their lives a constant public popularity contest.

Like buttons are catnip for brains, in other words, but the results of being unliked are worse. "It used to be that if you were bullied at school, you went home to your family. You were able to leave that negative environment. You were safe. You got a break from it. That allowed you to deal with it. Now if you are bullied online, it's in your pocket. It's in your room with you. You are never free. You are never safe," noted Cristina Fink, a Rowan University psychologist, in a recent conversation.

In 2017, Twenge had found that the most reliable antidote to the negative effects of social media and extensive screen use was sustained, in-person social interaction—away from phones and in direct engagement with others. The most powerful effect was often in the little things: smiling at one another, sharing a laugh, working together to accomplish some small, shared task like blocking stage positions for Act 3, Scene 1. Young people who played sports were far less likely to experience anxiety and depression, because they had an extended and enforced break from their phones *and* because when they were off their phones, they had connection-building social interactions to balance them.

But the numbers of kids who engaged in organized activities was declining. By 2019, a report by Common Sense Media found that the average teen spent more than seven hours per day on screens. Nearly two-thirds spent more than four hours per day on screen media.[5] For almost 30%, the average was eight hours a day.[6]

And then in 2020, the pandemic hit, and everything that might have offered such an alternative to screen time suddenly disappeared. When youth were not in school, not at practice, or not at the mall with friends, they were on their phones. Common Sense Media updated its findings in March 2022, reporting that screen and social media use had risen sharply during the pandemic, with the average teen *and preteen* spending more than one extra hour on screen media on top of already intense levels of exposure. Daily screen use went up among tweens (ages 8 to 12) to five and a half hours a day on average and to more than eight and a half hours per day for teens (ages 13 to 18). Low-income families were hit hardest, with parents most likely to have to work in person and fewer resources to spend on alternatives to screens.

At these levels of use, smartphones are catastrophic to the well-being of young people. "It's not an exaggeration to describe [this generation] as being on the brink of the worst mental-health crisis in decades," Twenge writes.

And the problems aren't limited to mental health. All that time on screen degrades attention and concentration skills, making it harder to focus fully on any task and to maintain that focus. This is not a small thing. Attention is central to every learning task, and the quality of attention paid by learners shapes the outcome of learning endeavors. The more rigorous the task, the more it requires what experts call directed (or sometimes selective) attention—defined as "the ability to inhibit distractions and sustain attention and

to shift attention appropriately," according to Michael Manos, clinical director of the Center for Attention and Learning at Cleveland Clinic. In other words, to learn well you must be able to maintain self-discipline about what you pay attention to.

The problem with cell phones is that young people using them switch tasks every few seconds. Better put, they *practice* switching tasks every few seconds, so they become more accustomed to states of half-attention, more expectant of new stimulus every few seconds. When a sentence or a problem requires slow, focused analysis, their minds are already glancing around for something new and more entertaining.

The brain rewires itself constantly based on how it functions. This idea, known as neuroplasticity, means that the more time young people spend in constant half-attentive task switching, the harder it becomes for them to maintain the capacity for sustained periods of intense concentration. After a time, a brain habituated to impulsivity rewires to become more prone to that state. "If kids' brains become accustomed to constant changes, the brain finds it difficult to adapt to a nondigital activity where things don't move quite as fast," Manos continued.

Though all of us are at risk of this, young people are especially susceptible. Their prefrontal cortex—the region of the brain that exerts impulse control and self-discipline—isn't fully developed until age 25. In 2017, a study found that undergraduates (more cerebrally mature than our K–12 students and so with stronger impulse control) "switched to a new task on average every 19 seconds when they were online." It's a safe conjecture that younger students can sustain even less attention.

In other words, any time young people are on a screen, they are in an environment that habituates them to states

of low attention and constant task switching. At first our phones fracture our attention when we use them, but after a time our minds are rewired for distraction. Soon enough our phones are within us.

LOSS OF FAITH IN INSTITUTIONS

Along with its effect on the lives of students and their social media usage, the pandemic has overlapped with and probably exacerbated another important social trend affecting students, schools, and educators: declining levels of trust in institutions. In their November 2020 report, *Democracy in Dark Times,*[7] professors James Hunter, Carl Bowman, and Kyle Puetz describe a "slowly evolving crisis of credibility for all of America's institutions." While the clearest places of declining credibility are (in this study and others) government and the media, declining faith in "the government's ability to solve problems," as the authors put it, also affects other institutions of public life, including schools.

The long-term trend, which began in the latter years of the 20th century but has accelerated since, shows citizens increasingly perceiving institutions as "incompetent" and "ethically suspect." This creates a legitimation crisis: people are far less likely to accept or support decisions from an institution they don't trust. They are less likely to contribute their time and effort to its initiatives. All this, of course, makes it harder to run those institutions effectively.

By mid-pandemic, the results of this disaffection ran deep. Half of all Americans, regardless of politics, said that there were days when they "felt like a stranger in my own country."

We should pause here to define the word "institutions." The political analyst Yuval Levin defines them as "the durable

forms**...**of what we do together. They're clumps of people organized around a particular end, and organized around an ideal and a way of achieving that important goal."[8] The range of institutions in American life is broad. An institution can be specific (a school district) or more abstract (public education).

The decline of faith in institutions affects schools directly, since they themselves are institutions. Schools can no longer count on receiving the goodwill and trust of the parents they serve. We can see this trend clearly in the data. The Pew Research Center, for example, regularly asks a wide sample of Americans about their faith in specific authority figures in various institutions. In early 2022[9] they found that, for example, faith in journalists had declined steeply. In 2018 more than half of Americans—55%—said they trusted journalists "a great deal" or "a fair amount," while 44% said "not too much or not at all." By 2022 the number had flipped: 40% of Americans trusted journalists, 60% did not. The level of mistrust in the profession increased by 50% in four years. Faith in elected officials declined slightly from already dismal numbers (perhaps there wasn't much farther those numbers could go).

These were among the professions with the greatest erosion of trust, but notice that the data also ask specifically about public school principals. There too we see significant declines. In 2018, 80% of Americans trusted school principals a fair amount or more. Only 20% were at "not much confidence" or less. In 2022 the trust numbers had declined to 64% and the mistrust numbers were at 35%. They had almost doubled.

It's worth noting that within the general trend—declining trust—the numbers show two subtrends. The first is increasing skepticism from the majority of parents. It's going to take a little more work to make them see they can

believe in their school and its capacity to get its core work of educating children done well. Then there is a separate trend of people who feel outright mistrust. These are families who may fight the school's policies if their skepticism is not effectively addressed.

This is critically important. Like the nations they are a part of, schools are institutions that rely on a social contract to do their work. Participants agree to accept relatively minor restrictions on their own actions in order to participate in the larger, more important benefits that accrue when everyone follows those rules. As a citizen, I accept that I will not steal my neighbor's possessions, no matter how much I want them. In return, I live in a society where everyone's possessions are secure, where it is worth having possessions because you are likely to keep them, and where people invent things worth having because others will value them, which they are only able to do if they can protect them. Want a vibrant entrepreneurial economy? Start with property rights.

Schools rely on a version of this social contract as well. As a student I accept that I will not shout out things in class and disrupt instruction so that others can learn; I benefit from the fact that I now have a space in which I can plausibly aspire to become what I dream of in life. As a parent I accept that my child will be asked to accept this social contract. This is to say that every school lives or dies on people's willingness to accept that authority is not just different from authoritarianism but benign and in fact beneficial—necessary to the construction of a social contract. That contract only works when participants trust the leader of the school to determine the terms of the contract. It does not take a majority rejecting the terms of a social contract to erode its viability. A handful is enough.

Public confidence in scientists and medical scientists has declined over the last year

% of U.S. adults who have ____ of confidence in the following groups to act in the best interests of the public

● A great deal ● A fair amount ● Not too much/No confidence at all

Medical scientists

	Jun '16	Jan '19	Apr '20	Nov '20	Dec '21
A fair amount	84	87	89	85	78
A great deal	24	35	43	40	29
Not too much/No confidence	15	13	11	14	22

Scientists

	Jun '16	Feb '18	Dec '18	Jan '19	Apr '20	Nov '20	Dec '21
A fair amount	76	79	83	86	87	84	77
A great deal	21	27	33	35	39	39	29
Not too much/No confidence	23	21	17	13	12	15	22

The military

	'16	'18	'18	'19	'20	'20	'21
A fair amount	79	80	83	82	83	83	74
A great deal	33	39	41	36	38	39	25
Not too much/No confidence	20	19	17	18	16	17	25

Police officers

	Dec '18	Apr '20	Nov '20	Dec '21
A fair amount	78	78	74	69
A great deal	30	24	26	20
Not too much/No confidence	22	21	26	31

Public school principals

	Dec '18	Jan '19	Apr '20	Nov '20	Dec '21
A fair amount	80	77	83	75	64
A great deal	25	21	28	21	14
Not too much/No confidence	20	22	17	25	35

Religious leaders

	'16	'18	'18	'19	'20	'20	'21
A fair amount	53	49	61	57	63	59	55
A great deal	13	9	15	13	17	15	12
Not too much/No confidence	46	50	38	43	37	40	45

Journalists

	Dec '18	'20	'20	'21
A fair amount	55	48	45	40
A great deal	15	9	9	6
Not too much/No confidence	44	52	54	60

Business leaders

	'16	'18	'18	'19	'20	'20	'21
A fair amount	41	44	43	46	48	46	40
A great deal	4	5	4	6	5	5	4
Not too much/No confidence	58	55	56	53	52	53	60

Elected officials

	'16	'18	'18	'19	'20	'20	'21
A fair amount	27	25	37	35	37	37	24
A great deal	3	3	4	4	3	4	2
Not too much/No confidence	72	75	63	64	62	63	76

Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.
Source: Survey conducted Nov. 30–Dec. 12, 2021.
"Americans' Trust in Scientists, Other Groups Declines"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

While we are talking about trust in schools, it's worth looking at one more data point. The Pew data above are specific to principals. How do people feel about their schools overall? The polling organization Gallup has been asking Americans the following question since 1973:[10] "I am going to read you a list of institutions in American society. Please tell me how much confidence you, yourself, have in each one—a great deal, quite a lot, some or very little."

Here are the responses when respondents were asked about public schools.

Gallup Poll: Confidence in Public Schools

- - - Very little %   ——— Great deal/Quite a lot %
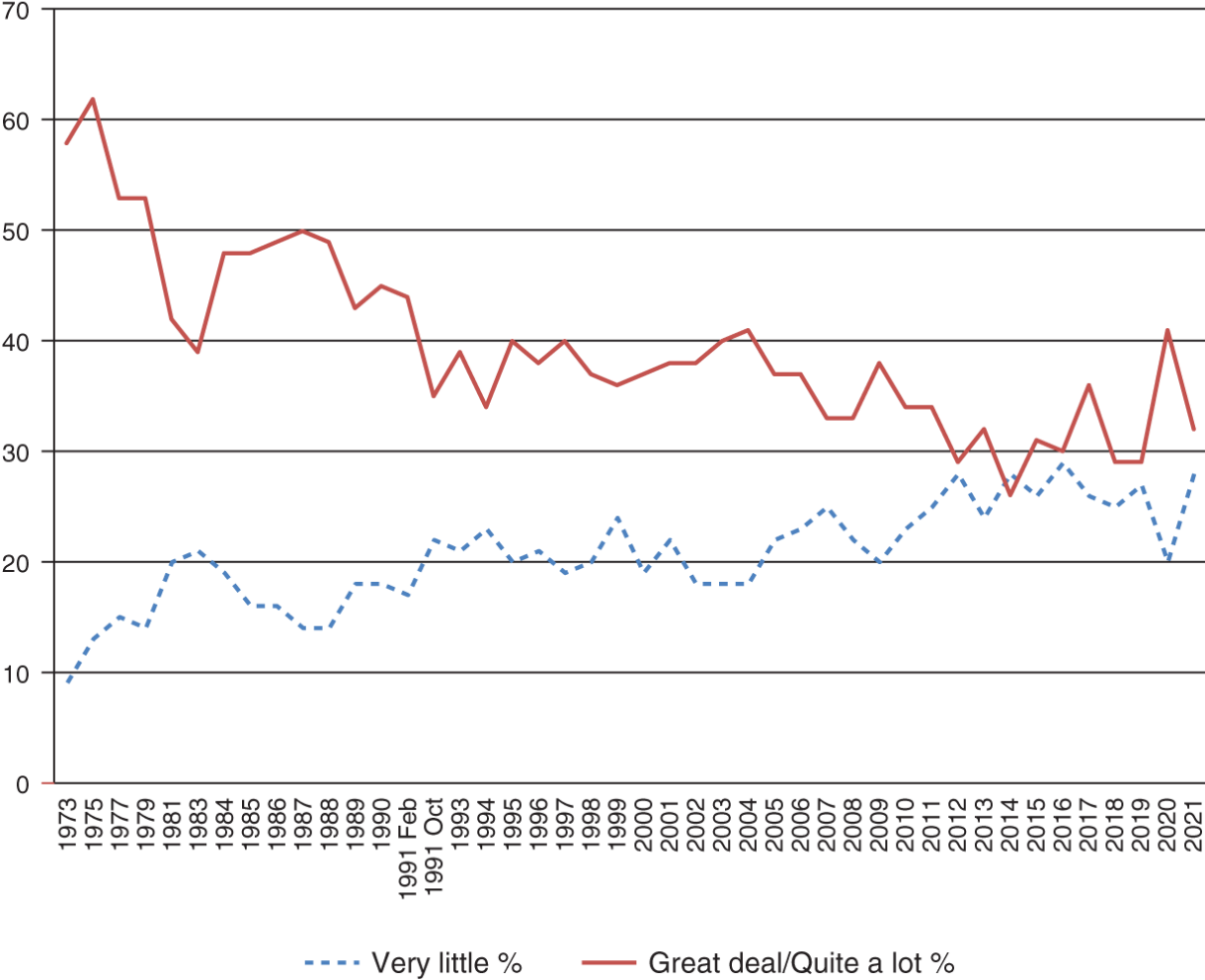
The long-term trend is clear. Over the 50 years that data have been gathered, confidence in public schools has declined steadily but pervasively. The percentage of respondents who felt "quite a lot" of confidence or more has dropped by half. Even in the first decade of the 21st century, numbers were routinely 10 points higher than they were in 2021.

This larger trend was broken by a short uptick of goodwill in 2020—our long pandemic year. Americans appeared to be grateful for the efforts of schools to respond to the crisis and were more forgiving and appreciative in their responses. But that uptick was a brief honeymoon. The data snapped back quickly.

The converse trend is also clear. The percentage of respondents who feel *very little* trust in their public schools has almost tripled in the years since the survey began. The lines now nearly touch. The average parent is just as likely to start at a point of mistrust as he or she is at a point of trust. Things are likely to stay that way or even get worse. Many parents' experience during the pandemic—their frustrations or outright anger with masking or distance learning, the historical rates at which they withdrew their children—will not soon fade from memory. Those are difficult conditions under which to hope to build and defend a new social contract. Schools face a clear challenge in the fact that the families they intend to serve feel less faith in their reliability, skill, and trustworthiness.

Meanwhile, a secondary challenge also looms. As schools struggle to operate in a climate of mistrust, the institutions composing the ecosystem schools work within—religious institutions, cultural institutions, those institutions that offer programs like sports and music and drama that connect young people throughout their community—are also struggling.

One result of the increased lack of trust in these institutions is lowered levels of participation in them. As a result, people are more and more likely to connect online instead of in person, say at a church or an activity or even a community meeting. Young people are less and less likely to infer codes of mutuality and cooperation from those institutions. In those places, they are more likely to meet with people whose beliefs and values do not mirror their own. Without them, they run the risk of living in an echo chamber where initial perceptions are easily reinforced and where people who disagree are vilified, their motives suspected.

Individuals who live in these sorts of environments rarely have cause to challenge or change their ideas and perceptions. Jonathan Haidt's research in *The Righteous Mind* makes this clear: people change their minds when people whom they trust and feel a connection to express a differing perspective. An adversary castigating you or impugning your motives almost never changes your mind or broadens your views. You change your mind or moderate your assumptions because someone whom you admire or appreciate in some other way holds a different opinion. The fact that people—particularly teenagers—are now less and less likely to meet and connect with people who are less like them in thought or background means the risk of increased cultural isolation (and probably political polarization) as well.[11] The declining trust in institutions not only makes schools' missions harder but also exacerbates the isolating effects of social media on students.

THE TENSION BETWEEN INDIVIDUALISM AND BELONGING

The final key challenge students and schools face today is how increasingly individualistic our culture is, often at the cost of communal orientation and mutual obligation.

The Dutch social psychologist Geert Hofstede defined individualism as "a preference for a loosely knit social framework in which individuals are expected to take care of only themselves and their immediate families." Its opposite, collectivism, is "a preference for a tightly knit society in which it is understood and expected that members of the group will look after each other in exchange for mutual loyalty." Hofstede ranked societies on a scale of 1 (maximum collectivism) to 100 (maximum individualism). China—a society grounded in Confucian roots that stress principles of mutual obligation—scores a 20. Brazil, also a relatively collectively inclined society, scores a 38. Western nations tend to be the most individualistic. Germany scores a 67. But the US scores the highest of any nation: a 91, with the UK not far behind.

Not only is the United States currently the most individualistic society in the world, it's also a safe bet that we are the most individualistic society in the history of humankind. As you might guess, the shift to modernity has been a shift away from a collective mentality. As Jonathan Haidt puts it, most societies historically chose the "sociocentric" answer—a belief in communal bonds—until in the 20th century, when "individual rights expanded rapidly, and consumer culture spread." An individualistic orientation replaced a "sociocentric" one. In other words, individuality is a modernist tendency.

We want to be clear: we're good with individualism. Much of its rise is a reaction to the destruction of individual rights and freedoms demonstrated by totalitarian regimes of the 20th century. It's hard to watch the erosion of individualism in Russia and China today and want to trade.