

SCHOOL PLAY

A Documentary Play

Created by

Arden Kass,
Seth Bauer & Edward Sobel

(ME VS. WE: An abridged 20 minute version)

This script is available free of charge for any and all performances. For inquiries or to book for a performance, contact Public Citizens for Children & Youth.

PCCY
1709 Benjamin Franklin Parkway
Philadelphia, PA 19103
Phone: Steven Fynes,
215.563.0677, ext. 11
schoolplay@pccy.org

ABOUT THE PROJECT

"I'm not a teacher because I love English, you know. I love English, but I love people and so I felt needed in a different, like in a bigger way than just to impart knowledge and I think that that's what some of my students fight against and some of them learn to appreciate."

– Tracy King, English Teacher

"It's not a great time to be in public education. You definitely feel, more so than not, that you are a failure and not a success. Really- sometimes I move papers from one side of the desk to the other just to feel like I accomplished something at the end of the day— no really."

– Dan McGarry, Assistant School Superintendent

"So, am I going to be the villain in your play?"

– Charles Zogby, Former PA Secretary of Ed and Budget Secretary

School Play is based on over a hundred interviews conducted in 2014/15 with students, teachers, administrators, politicians and public figures in the education landscape of Pennsylvania.

It was conceived by Arden Kass and created by Kass, Seth Bauer and Edward Sobel. The project was commissioned by the advocacy organization Public Citizens for Children & Youth. It came about because we are all parents and we all agreed that public education was in danger in our state, and that we could help raise awareness of the problem and motivate more people to become involved in finding a solution by putting a human face on the situation through theatre.

School Play purposefully poses more questions than answers, yet a few facts are clear: yes, public education can excel, and in more ways than we understood going in; yes, our education system needs to evolve to reflect the world in which it now exists. And yes, we need a reliable, sustainable method for funding it.

Above all, we as a state and a society need to bring a huge dose of humanity and humility to any discussion of the decisions we make for students, teachers and education professionals, whose personal connections to education are more powerful and more amazing than anything we could have invented.

We thank everyone who contributed, whether their voice appears here on the page or in our heads, helping to shape this play.

PRODUCTION NOTES

School Play opened at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia on April 8, 2015, with five actors. They played a few main characters each, plus the supplementary characters. It is absolutely possible to use a larger cast and less role switching or to perform a shorter version than the 75-minute full-length play. Multiple versions are offered online.

Appropriately for the inherently diverse world of public education, there are no requirements for casting in regard to age, gender or race, and no required props. As a set, we used a projection of our logo and five chairs, each of which served as “home base” for a major character, making it easier for the audience to track and identify them. Again, these are just facts; interpret the script however you see it working best for your audience and venue.

We suggest a recorded or live announcement or a slide at the top of the play as follows: “All the language in **School Play** is taken from interviews conducted across the state of Pennsylvania in 2014 and 2015.”

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I. MY FAVORITE TEACHER

JAMIL ALLEN (elementary school parent)

Second grade teacher. Miss Brown.

Not only was she a great teacher, but she was a COOL teacher.

DR. SHELDON PAVEL (retired High School president)

Mrs. Liggett. She allowed me to explore. I was very interested in national parks. I would do the reading, and then she would let me teach the class. In sixth grade.

GABBY KRAMER (suburban high school junior)

There's this history teacher. He doesn't treat kids like they're sort of, lower than him? He's like just very like down to earth and understands like everything ... like when you're younger, like what you're going through? He's cool.

ERICA SWIFT

Mister...What's his name...?

CALEB SWARTZ (middle aged professional)

At the end of the season, my lineman coach said, "Swartzzy, where you going to college?" And I said, "Coach, I don't think I'm going to college." And he said, and I quote, "You're too damn smart not to go to college."

ERICA SWIFT

...begins with M, I can't remember right now.

CALEB SWARTZ

So, I put my applications in in January of my senior year. And I went to on become a history teacher just like my coach (*laughs*). And that's how I chose my college...So, ironically, I -- (*laughs*) am a college admissions representative.

JAMIL ALLEN

She drove, what is this, back in '82.

I think she had, like a Trans Am or something like that!

(*Laughs*)

She was cool!

JOHN WILLIAM DAVIS (middle-aged manual laborer)

She was cool, Miss Griffin.

I mean, if I was uhh, even if I was showing off or whatever, she'd give me some kind words, you know... like yeah...like a mother, you know?

MELANA SIMS (elementary school guidance counselor)

My basketball coach, Stacey Tussig -- whenever I'd have a good game and my dad wouldn't be there to see it, she always provided me with a little extra umm, encouragement.

ERICA SWIFT

He asked me one question and I remember raising my hand and answering it and that was it for me. He said,

DR. SHELDON PAVEL

'when do we start questioning is there a God?'

ERICA SWIFT (High School teacher)

And I said, "it's when ... when we're in pain", and I remember him saying 'yeah, I think you're right'. And that sparked my interest in reading. Now I'm an English teacher.

MATT De PROSPERO (middle-aged handyman/artist)

My 8th grade teacher. She was a nun. She was very young. Maybe 21. I didn't realize at the time. And she actually took me aside and said you know, who do you think the smartest kid in this class is and I pointed out someone. She said

DONNA WRIGHT (as a nun)

No, it's you.

DON TROTZ (School counselor)

Emmet Mark. I went through kind of a streak where I just didn't want to be around people. Um and I was just kind of hateful and just didn't like him, cause he always uh would say "hey how *are* ya?", and like you know, just very encouraging very optimistic and I *really* didn't like him, and I let him know I didn't like him, and he would always say, "you don't have to like me but you know what, I like you and your entire family!"

(laughter)

After a while it works on you.

JOE BRUNI (72 year-old school superintendent)

We couldn't wait to get to school.

DON TROTZ

Mrs. Barcameron, Mrs. Young, uh Mrs. Levintree, Mrs, Cobaldy. These were four ladies that constantly were always uh lovin us -- a family so to speak.

JOE BRUNI

The chocolate milk tastes best in school than in anywhere else in the world.

ERICA SWIFT

We got the best music teacher. Talk about budget cuts, his position was cut the very next year. Last name was 'Force' and the kids were holding up signs, and like 'keep the force with us', 'may the force be with us'. And he was the BEST and he did so many things with me with this program. He was cut.

II. INEQUALITY OLYMPICS

YVONNE (high school junior)

I'm gonna get really emotional because I cannot stand - the bathroom! In our bathroom, first of all, God bless Miss Beaver for getting these new soap dispensers. They are so nice.

(KIDS agree, snapping their fingers as hip kids do...)

And like the soap is all foamy. Instead of like that gooey stuff. And like, like we have five stalls in our girls' bathroom only two have locks. Ok. There are two toilets that are stopped up every day. you cannot flush them. you cannot unplug them. Cuz that cleaning lady just walk in there and wipe the floors and come out. And we have three messed up toilet seats I don't know what happened. They're like burnt or something. It's like a tannish, just like - it's not good. But like it's like - I mean it's little things. Like Um. getting locks on the bathrooms. I don't know if I'm just the only person, but when I go to the bathroom I want some type of security that no one's gonna try to bust in there cuz they think nobody in there. And I can't stop the door cuz there's no lock, on the door. And um, like maybe like - it doesn't even necessarily have to be anything big like not like a big ole like bathroom makeover but like maybe clean, clean.

BRANDON LEONARD

The bathrooms? They, they're just really clean. I mean the urinals are like...

LEO LEVY

Out of the, let's say 15 urinals in the building, probably 2 are consistently functional. Most of them are missing the barriers between them.

BRANDON LEONARD

All the toilets are automatic flushing.

LEO LEVY

The one that does flush is always flushing.

BRANDON LEONARD

Lap pool. Diving pool. Boys and girls locker rooms for the pool...and then for the gym—

LEO LEVY

We don't have changing rooms. We have lockers.

GABBY KRAMER

We have six tennis courts.

LEO LEVY

I stand in the hallway and smear myself with Speedstick.

YVONNE

(She begins to tear up) You have these little bit of teachers that are still here taking on like 20 classes a day. Because they're - when you have - oh my goodness -- Miss Davis -our Spanish teacher - she'll say, "I teach over two hundred classes", and like - she'll really be like that. And she'll be like "I don't know anyone's name. I don't know where your tests are. I don't know anything!" I'm Yavonne*, by the way. High School Junior.

RENE COHEN

My kids get to focus on what they're there to focus on. And the staff is happy to be there, you know, it's just holistic. It's like, a safe, confident, happy, experience.

BRANDON LEONARD

...Pretty much every class has a smart board... There's a projector in every single room. White boards. No, no chalkboards. I don't think I've ever seen a chalkboard.

RENE COHEN (Suburban H.S. parent)

I mean, we're in this little bubble, and I feel so grateful. But that's why we moved here. Hopefully, my children won't take it for granted.

YVONNE

We lost our nurse. Our nurse is only here like maybe Tuesdays and Thursdays, What happens on a Monday, Wednesday or a Friday?

DONNA WRIGHT

Our smartest students are the ones we're failing the hardest. We're preparing them for mediocre lives. It's not intentional, it's not malicious, it's just, when you have 30 kids in a classroom, when I have to tell the students to do research on their mobile phones, that's a problem. Like, it's usually freezing in my classroom. Frequently, I teach in my coat.

CHARLES ZOGBY (self-confident, 50-ish politician)

I don't think everything is in short supply. We spend a ton of money in this state in terms of basic education. People always argue for more.

YVONNE

Charles Zogby, former Pennsylvania Budget Secretary and former Secretary of Education.

CHARLES ZOGBY

Give me an example of a good school that's struggling to keep its doors open-

MARLENE GOEBICH

There's no paper! There's no money for paper.

Three years ago, when they cut the budget they said there's no money for paper. So bring your own. You can use the machine but there's no paper!

BEE REED

I remember doing my chapter reading for science class and it said, "maybe with the technological advances, we'll be able to land a man on the moon someday". "Land a man on the moon someday"? I read it three times to make sure it was correct. And I pointed it out to my teacher who basically asked us to excuse him for a second, and apparently marched down to the principal's office and was like—

TEACHER

WE NEED NEW BOOKS!

KYANNA

I'm Kyanna Hatton. Being a senior, I have to print out a lot of college things. There's one computer in the library. The screen is cracked. Mind you, you have a 167 seniors trying to print everything. The printer is broke every other day. And I'm just like – you know we need them -- can we get it fixed? But "we don't have money".

BRANDON'S MOM

There's an X-Box room, right? They count it as gym.

BRANDON LEONARD

Mom! It's A Wii room. It's a room with a bunch of flat screen TV's in there, all around. X-box Connect and, uhh, Wii everywhere.

RENE COHEN

The things my children are involved in from you know, jazz bands to technology clubs --it gets them to start thinking about who they are and where they want to go.

KYANNA

Boom! The real world. You have to figure out what job you're gonna do and actually like be something in life. And like you see in movies like the kids go to the counselor and he's like "yeah I'll help you do this that and the third." My counselor, he's somewhat helpful. But there've been countless times when he's like "I have so much to do, figure it out on your own." And going to a household where - like I live in single parent home with two other siblings. So I go home and it's basically like - you're on your own.

GABBY KRAMER

Compared to like Upper Darby or something, like I am so fortunate.

JENN HOFF: (a high-intensity School Board President)

Jenn Hoff, School Board President. If you are on the poverty level you are likely to be in a failing school. That is the word.

RENE COHEN

I don't think life is fair, always, but I think it's how you handle it...?

III. ACTORS READ THREE LETTERS

ACTOR:

Dear State Leaders in Harrisburg,
We need to have nurse in our school every day because when we are playing we might get injured or the students might have cuts. We never know.
Yours truly, Taro Iwakyra

ACTOR:

Dear State Leaders in Harrisburg,
Our school needs a counselor because when I need help when I am sad, who's going to help when I cry because my grandmother died.
Sincerely, Destiny Slueue, Grade 3

ACTOR:

To whom it may concern,
Please don't put more kids in 1 room because then my teacher will not get to teach and because she will have to scream at the other kids and that is going to let her lose her voice. So don't let her lose her voice.
Unsigned.

IV. ME VS. WE

PETER SCHMITZ

We moved here from Minnesota when the boys were uh I think they were about 6 and 7. Oh, I'm Peter Schmitz. I have two boys.

It was um immediately clear to me how huge the disparity was just 5 -6 miles away, what resources the kid would have at his command. You'd see in the paper, okay a kid here they spend \$30,000 per student and a kid in down the street, well they spend maybe \$12- \$13,000 dollars per student. Wow, that's a big difference.

You see the kids there and think immediately they're cutting libraries, or they're cutting music programs, they're cutting arts programs. They're um...they're merging schools. They're having class sizes of 20, 25, 35 in a class... I felt

(long pause)

awful... for those kids.

They shouldn't, it shouldn't be like that.

Where my boys are now, Tom and some other kids,
 they get interested in Japanese culture through Manga and Anime.
 And there's enough kids like him that they
 hired a Japanese teacher and ... and it's been another area of mastery for him
 (beat)

Um, once my boys are through the school system, I may no longer wish to pay
 this property tax, much as I love this community.
 And, it will no longer be a question of protecting my kids.
 It's just me, I can put up with it.

Now I know this isn't a political discussion and I won't get to that, but I'm...
 Because I tend to read a lot, you know, take in a lot of news,
 I know that there are countries where they set things up,
 that no matter where you live,
 Your school will be the same.
 It shouldn't matter where you live for what kind of education you get.

Do I have an answer? No, but I have awareness of it.
 (pause)

You know only 15 to 25% of people really pay attention to larger social and
 political issues. So, I don't ... uh
 (long pause)

Things could change. You don't know.

MELANA SIMS

A family came to me last year.
 They were new to the area. From New York.
 And when I met with them, as we meet with all the new students,
 Something just told me to ask them what was bringing them here.
 So, I started to ask questions and they started telling me that basically
 they came here with nothing. And when some people say we have nothing
 it's interpreted like they might not have everything they need
 and sometimes it literally means nothing.

So, I asked where they were staying and they were staying in one of our
 housing projects and I told them I said, well, I'll gather some stuff up
 and I can drop it off, I live 5 minutes away
 And when I got there that night they were sitting
 on the linoleum floor in the projects.
 you know, there are a lot of times people think they have it rough
 or they think that they're poor, but that in fact is poor
 when you're sitting on a bare floor waiting for your counselor to come with a pot
 so you can cook the food that you just got off your food stamps.
 So, I went into panic mode and gathered up a bunch of stuff from people-
 At least got them some bedding and pillows and things like that.

It's, it's discouraging sometimes whenever people will criticize or critique how we do on standardized testing versus some of the other districts, but our demographics are very different. but we're making gains, we're always making gains and sometimes it's just not portrayed in such a way where we're at the level that we need to be, but we are getting there, we're making positive.... We're taking steps to, to improve upon that and we do, you know make gains.

V. THESE KIDS CAN GO ANYWHERE

GERRY ZAHORCHAK

Ariel, let me ask you a question. Would you ever think you would go to Sunnehanna Country Club, up on the hill, and speak to a group of adults at their meeting, where you are in charge?

ARIEL

Okay. *(Laughter)* Put me on the spot. We get to go to these lunches at Sunnehanna Country Club—Well everyone gets a chance, not just me. The InterACT club. They have really good food. Umm, that's why I agreed to go at first. *(Laughter)*

GERRY ZAVORCHEK

The truth. It's all about the food.

ARIEL

'Cause I said, "What's this for?" And they said, "You're gonna talk in front a bunch of professional people." I said, "Uhh, I don't know". I just wanted the food. I didn't care about the talkin'. But basically what you do is listen to the upcoming projects they have, like the different community service projects. And you listen to their ideas and I don't know, you get to interact with a lot of professional people. Like the owner of McDonald's or a nurse. He's strange, but he's a good nurse. You know who I'm talking about right? *(Laughter)* Don't tell him I said that.

GERRY ZAHORCHAK (greatly amused)

He's a dentist. She called him a nurse. And he's a really radical conservative. But she's sitting up there next to him.

ARIEL

And they can help you. Say you want to get into a college that other people want to get in to, that will help you. Like, they are really good references. And their influence is, they are like role models.

GERRY ZAHORCHAK

I don't have to stay at this. I'm at retirement age you know. But this is bigger than me. Just like you heard from Mike Vukovich, I thought it was great --

MIKE VUCKOVICH

"I don't want to hang around and admire the problems of poverty while we could be working at systems that would overcome it."

The one thing that defines this school, this country, is hope and care. You want to be successful in life, two things, work hard, be nice. And persistence: that's what used to define us. I don't know if it does anymore. Right? Like-- that's my diatribe on the subject.

SERGEANT SPANKO

I was in Fallujah, I was in Iraq and I was in Afghanistan. I says, "One of the greatest things that those children wanted was an education. They wanted a book, they wanted to read. And they couldn't. They weren't allowed." And I says, "You can't put a price on education, you can't put a price on a child's future. I'm the past, you guys are the future. You're the leaders. You're going to be the politicians, the police officers, the paramedics, you're going to be everything this town needs, so take the education that these teachers are giving you and use it. Because there's kids in other worlds and countries that can't do that. They can't even wear what they want to wear." And I says, "you're the future."

DOUG HERMAN

I love getting kids to understand that they ARE history, and how they pay attention to what's going on in the world is really important. Making them educated, engaged, involved, citizens is - It's unbelievable that we don't have Civics as a mandated class anymore, and then we wonder why we have this under-engaged electorate...it's not shocking why it happens.

GERRY ZAHORCHAK

We're almost telling students from birth, from the zip code they live in, "You're going to fail in life, not just *your education*, you're gonna fail in life." And you can see it on the streets in many of these cities. You see the decay in human beings, in their face, in their teeth. And just their posture, uh, as they're, you know, up against a building or sitting on the curb, um, they've been kicked to the curb because of the funding systems for education.

JOE BRUNI

I wanna show the world that they are capable. That's my big thing! When our kids won the mock trial contest at the Delaware County courthouse two years ago, the whole courthouse went nuts. They blew every private school away. These kids were just phenomenal, and I said "YAY" to that! These kids can go anywhere. Compete anywhere. That's what it's all about.

KYANNA

Pride? Pride builds character and allows you to find the new love for something. Like you can find love like if I might not have as much pride in myself but to see Yavonne every day, I feed off of it. I wanna be like that! Like it inspires me. The thing I learned about school is that uh - um, I don't know how to sum it up -- I learned that like - you have to find things out on your own and like don't belittle yourself. Because they teach you like - I don't know - like history class. They teach you a nationalistic point of view of like the world. But like you start to like uncover different truths that are like, not lies - but the truths and your perception of new things. And then like, that to me, that is what inspires me to like build myself to be a better individual. And it teaches me like in the future - when I have children, if I have children - (laughter) like - I wanna tell other people, like I wanna express that to people who don't know. I wanna tell YOU.

DONNA WRIGHT

You know, I do take joy -- in lots and lots and lots and lots of little things. I just take joy in their personalities. Seeing them accomplish things. I love the kids. They make me giggle, they say outrageous things to me, and um, like I laugh every single day.

KID: Miss Wright, can I go to the bathroom?

DONNA: Yes, Kathleen. Hi Raven, how are you? Miss Parker, where are you on your outline. This is my favorite brat. She thinks she's my child, so the other day she took a video of herself on my phone, eating my food.

I was so mad. My strategy for keeping the kids away from my food? I lick it! Go Jimmy, go!

KID: I love your class

DONNA: I can't get rid of them. He doesn't belong in my class until after lunch.

YVONNE

The way, I am - I don't know --- I was born an optimist!
So like when people are like - what will you plan on doing in college I'm like I'm gonna major in theatre. Well theatre won't make you any money, well I'll major in theatre, and minor in entrepreneurship, because even if I don't um - become this famous actress or choreographer, I'll just probably open up my own business, that has something to do with the arts. So - how I kinda look at it - people like to refer to things as plan a, plan b. And the way my mindset is "If plan a doesn't work, there are 25 other letters in the alphabet!"

JOE BRUNI

Their lives become your life. You open up all kinds of little boxes that you didn't expect to find.

END OF PLAY