

# **SCHOOL PLAY**

A Documentary Play

Created by

Arden Kass,  
Seth Bauer & Edward Sobel

(INEQUALITY: 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.*

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## 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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## **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.

**YVONNE**

What does it feel like? Dirty! With them bathrooms. Oh my god! And then it's like—you get excused, the 1st floor bathroom is flooded, man, I've got to go to the 2nd floor...3rd floor, Now I go back to class—

**TEACHER (Marlene Goebich)**

“Why were you out of class so long? I don't trust you to be excused ever again. “

**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.

**DONNA WRIGHT** (High School English teacher)

You have to turn off so many distractions.

**LEO LEVY**

Ms. Wright. (*off Donna's "shush" glare*) High school English teacher.

**DONNA WRIGHT**

You have to be like SUCH a go-getter in order to "make it."

These kids do work hard, for the most part, and they do want it, hard, but they're so closed to the fact that -- there are people at -- there are people that have all of these resources, like--

(*She glares at the actors behind her*) Be Quiet. Thank you! She's recording me. We'll talk about why you're late in a few minutes.

**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.

\*correct pronunciation

**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.

**SHERI UTAIN**

SHERI Utain, 43 years in Special Education.

I had one student who literally climbed walls. Or windows. So you had this poor child sitting there needing help with multiplication and the teacher's over here trying to get this student down... If you had an aide, the aide could walk either the student or the rest of the students out of the classroom, you know. So they can refocus-

**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.

**GABBY KRAMER**

We play paddle tennis at Philly Country Club. It's kinda like, a privilege I guess.

**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. The printer is broke every other day. Mind you, you have a 167 seniors trying to print everything. 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. To, you know be able to be where I am. Oh, I'm Gabby Kramer. And that's why certain kids come from you know other states or cities or whatever to go to our school district because it's just such a great one it's between, like, all around, everything about it.

**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...?

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**ACTOR READS LETTER:**

Dear Senator Stack,

I just have to ask "why?" Why is the state legislature deciding to impose these budget cuts on our school district, on the present students and on all future generations?

I look around me, and I see many of my peers. I see talented engineers, warmhearted teachers, passionate activists and politicians, aspiring musicians, shining stars, skillful businessmen, outstanding performers and so much more.

I have to ask you again, what are your loves? What did you love to do in high school? What made you into the person that you are today? Do you have children? What are their loves? What will they do, who will they be in the future? Most importantly, is all of this okay? I hope you truthfully answer these questions at least to yourself.

Sincerely,

Samantha Ho, High School Junior

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**ART VS. MONEY**

**DAN MCGARRY**

People don't connect to data,  
they connect to personal things. I went through it four years ago.  
Four years ago, ummm I was asked to come up here  
as Assistant Superintendent, and six months into the position  
all the stimulus money had run out.

Ummm--The year before I walked into this position, we had removed you know  
close to nine million dollars in staffing.

25 to 30 elementary reading teachers were gone – overnight.

Six months into the job, we were 13 million dollars short.

There was nothing left to cut in this school district.

The only thing left to cut was elementary art, music, and physical education.

So I had to announce that we were cutting the elementary art, phys. Ed.,  
and music program.



I tried to couch that with, okay, so this is not a good thing, but we could turn it into a positive thing, because art - and I am a proper example of trying to explain the data trends to people – if we don't do something now because we lost all this reading support, we are in 3 years going to be in major trouble academically.

**DOUG HERMAN** (hipster-ish high school teacher)

There was one student - He was in tenth grade at the time.

**YVONNE:** Doug Herman. History and Media Teacher.

**DOUG:** He really struggled, like, connecting with his peers. He didn't know how to just be a kid, and it was because of the experiences he was having outside of school. He was living a very rough life, there were some moments when he felt like he was kinda homeless. Other times he just witnessed stuff - in his real day-to-day life, where people that he cared about got killed and then he'd come to school and it really wasn't a safe place. There were a couple of places it was safe. He'd come to my classroom, we'd have lunch.

One day he came to talk to me on a Friday— we always had a staff meeting on Friday afternoons— He came to me right at the end of the school day, and I was like, “Hey man, I gotta go to the meeting.”

And then I heard all this chaos out in the hallway— like stuff like smashing and breaking. And I found him like, just losing his mind. I tried to calm him down and he turned on me. Like, he started to attack me. He was just in a blind rage, and I calmed him down, I got him to relax.

But then I recognized that we were about to go into a long weekend.

And he was now going to have like, 3 or 4 days of not having this safe place to go to, and not knowing where he was going to sleep, and if he was going to have food— And so he had this like, really crazy moment where he just lost his cool completely.

And there was something in me that was like, We Need To Put This Kid On The Stage. I saw - the emotions that I saw coming out of that child in this moment, I was like, if we can channel that and show him how to use that –

We started a drama program. And by the end of the year, he went from that kid who everyone avoided, and he became, like the star of the school. He was AMAZING on stage.

He graduated, he went to college, he went into acting. He still looks back with kind eyes. He knew if he didn't have that after school program and that summer program, that he envisioned a very different future. He just thought he was going to jail.

**DAN MCGARRY**

Talking about data that nobody really wants to focus on if we can get first graders reading “X” number of words per minute accurately we have just made their life infinitely better.

But we ended up cutting the very fiber of that...  
So if I took away those -- art, music, I could bring back hourly reading tutors  
make sure that we didn't have any second grade, third grade students  
leaving our schools unable to read.  
Long story short, that didn't go very well  
the entire Performing Arts Center was filled with "save the arts" signs.  
Signs all over. Ironically when we cut the 25 to 30 reading teachers,  
there wasn't a sign. Not a peep.  
I tried to use the data we were talking about, but nobody heard a thing...  
It became "all he cares about is data", "all he cares about are the tests"

My mom's an artist, so is my brother by the way.  
My brother went to high school here and went to art school from here-  
changed his life- this school district so... (finger snap)

### **YVONNE**

I'm glad you said that about the creativity thing because like –  
at times I like use it to my – advantage.  
Like when I first started going here, people would ask me, oh well is it victorious  
like Hollywood Arts?  
Like is people singing and dancing in the hallway?  
Like this is *not* High School Musical!  
We have academic classes like everybody else.  
We have a 3 minute bell, you better get to your class.  
But like um, there's like times – ok –  
like at home I started using it to my advantage.  
I felt like - I don't know, it made me confident.  
Because I had gotten accepted as a theatre major,  
I was like walking around the house saying um "there's inside you"  
which is like a poem – I would say it in different tones and my mom would be like,  
"Excuse me miss, you need to shut it down."  
(*as self*) "I'm practicing mom, it's a role, it's a role!"  
Yavonne. High school junior.

### **DAN MCGARRY**

My popularity? My popularity stinks.  
I've tried to get people to see who I am but I am partially to blame for that  
because when I delivered the message the first time  
in my heart I really thought "what are you upset about,  
it's much more upsetting to be an 18 or 19 year old not being able to read."

I would go home, and my wife would be at the top of the staircase crying  
"they are doing stuff to my house," you know, because  
I was living in the community – throwing stuff at my house  
putting stuff on my car -- it was awful.  
She would come to the top of the step and she was crying

she would say, "When you are at the next board meeting, please tell them that you didn't mean it, you had to say it."

And I would say, "No, I do mean it.

If we don't get little kids to be able to read when they are little, it's going to hurt them."

So it was a hell of a period of time.

We lost.

I lost I'll say.

We brought back all the art, all the music, all the phys. Ed.

And we brought back no reading support.

And now our highest performing schools are scoring the same exact way as our lowest performing schools.

It's heartbreaking because I didn't want to be right

People are now saying, "so the data that you presented was true."

Because the schools are now painted as failing, horribly failing schools.

And if you drive through this community- I live here- the number of "for sale" signs is unbelievable.

You have this flight from one of the best communities.

I was born and raised here, I went to the high school here

it was a phenomenal place, the diversity and the opportunities...

But when you take away from kids who need it, the scores are going to drop.

The reality is we shouldn't be in a situation where we are taking away anything from any kids. The only area we could take something away was around the arts. Because they are not required by Chapter 4. They're not being measured.

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## **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.

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## **X. 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.

END

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