

The Kids Are All Fried

After a springtime of Zoom school, they've earned a summer of ice cream and water



balloons

ILLUSTRATION: ZOHAR LAZAR



By

Jason Gay

June 26, 2020 9:00 am ET

I begin this column with a request: If you know any teachers, buy them a drink. Buy them *all* of the drinks. If they do not drink, buy them an ice cream. If they do not eat ice cream...just thank them. It's the least we can do.

Just don't ask: *What's going to happen with school next year?* Because they almost surely do not know. Teachers are wrapping up the craziest, most challenging spring of their careers, and no one has a clear idea of what's coming in September.

Maybe they'll be in school, maybe they won't. Maybe they'll be teaching in person every other week. Maybe it'll be back to the hellscape of teaching via Zoom. Maybe they'll have smaller classes. Maybe they'll have plastic shields between desks. Maybe they'll have an assistant: a disinfecting laser robot named Bonkers.

Yes: Everyone's life has been disrupted this year. And no human knows exactly what the fall of 2020 will bring. But teachers had to remake their entire careers on the fly, overnight, and now it will be followed by a stressful summer of planning, improvising and waiting to see what's going to be allowed.

Trust me: There's a teacher in my house. The Zooming hasn't stopped. Summer is pretty much out the window. It'll be an anxious crawl to autumn.

This summer, we'll go to the drive-in; I promise. And afterward, we'll go look at the stars.

And the kids? The kids are fried. At least my kids are. I could see the circles under their eyes around mid-April, after the umpteenth remote class and iPad assignment. Virtual school was a

pandemic necessity—sort of fun at first—but the novelty wore off quick. I didn't think it was possible for a kid to become uninterested in an iPad, but it happened.

They missed their classroom. They missed their friends. The schools did the best they could, but it wasn't the same.

That's why it feels essential for kids to go back to kid stuff this summer. I know they're supposed to stick with the daily reading, practice the writing, and even do some math, because no one wants the dreaded "summer slide." I get it.

But my kids are young. They're not worried about college yet, and who knows what college will look like when it's time for them to go, anyway. Maybe college is simply an app on the phone. Maybe college is taught by a disinfecting laser robot named Bonkers.

So this summer I'm taking the brakes off. This summer we're going rogue. I want my kids to do what they want to do. I want them staying up a little too late. I want water balloon fights and squirt gun holsters. I want ice cream before lunch and pizza for breakfast.

There's a drive-in movie theater—we blow past it every summer and I say to my family, *Hey, maybe we should go to that drive-in* and we never do, because I'm a jerk. This summer, we'll go; I promise. And afterward, we'll go look at the stars. I say that every summer, too—I'm going to learn about the stars and be able to say smart things about the stars, but I really am going to do it. *Look, there's Cassiopeia.* I've always wanted to say that. I have no idea what Cassiopeia is. It could be a roller rink in New Jersey.

(I know there's an app on your phone that lets you find all the stars, but I don't want to use my stupid phone. I want to bury my phone in the woods.)

The point is I want my kids to be kids. There's been a lot of talk over the past few months about adult anxieties, the impact upon adult lives. Every other story in the paper seemed to be about how work-from-home parents were being driven crazy by their demanding children. I wonder if we haven't been thinking enough about the impact this has had on children, because they've been feeling it, too. How could they not? You think hanging out with *adults* is some kind of picnic? Adults are the pits!

They just reopened the playgrounds in New York City this past week. On Monday, my daughter—freshly graduated from pre-K on Zoom—came back from a trip to the playground and dejectedly said it was "weird," that the playground she loved didn't feel the same. On Tuesday, however, she came back soaked to the bone, grinning madly.

She'd gotten into a water balloon fight.

I'm telling you, I nearly broke down standing there in the kitchen. Summer is here, not a minute too soon.

Write to Jason Gay at Jason.Gay@wsj.com

Copyright ©2020 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved.