Why do we need SCHOOLS?

KEY IDEA Traditionally, a school's most basic function was to teach the “three Rs”: reading, writing, and ’rithmetic. More recently, Bill Gates, founder of the Microsoft Corporation, suggested that today's schools need to focus on three new “Rs”: rigor, relevance, and relationships. In the essay you're about to read, Lynda Barry describes how the relationships made all the difference in her life.

DISCUSS With a small group, discuss what you think are a school's three most important tasks. Write them down and share them with your class. How many ideas have to do with the classroom and lessons? How many are tied to something less academic?
Lynda Barry
born 1956

DIFFICULT CHILDHOOD

Lynda Barry never felt that she “fit in”—not with her classmates at school, nor with either side of her parents’ Filipino and Norwegian-Irish families. An excellent student, Barry became the first member of her family to attend college. There she began drawing quirky comic strips based on her own life experiences and publishing them in her school’s student newspaper.

comic strip success

After college, Barry struggled to decide what to do with her life and how to support herself. Cartoonist and writer Matt Groening (creator of The Simpsons television series) had been a college classmate of Barry’s. Through Groening, the Chicago Reader newspaper learned of Barry’s work and hired her to draw a weekly comic strip. Soon, her comic strips “Girls and Boys,” “Ernie Pook’s Comeek,” and “Modern Romance” gained her a nationwide following. She has also published plays and novels, including The Good Times Are Killing Me and Cruddy: An Illustrated Novel.

Her childhood continues to have a big effect on her art. Childhood, she says, is “where all our motivations, feelings, and opinions come from.”

VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

The boldfaced words help Lynda Barry to convey what she felt about school when she was a little girl. To see how many of them you know, restate each sentence, using a different word or phrase for the boldfaced term.

1. A neglectful student forgets to do her homework.
2. Children thrive in loving, secure homes.
3. Our school doesn’t look unique or exciting on the outside, but inside it is anything but nondescript.
4. On a hot day, an air-conditioned classroom is a sanctuary.

MORE ABOUT THE AUTHOR

For more on Lynda Barry, visit the Literature Center at ClassZone.com.
I was seven years old the first time I snuck out of the house in the dark. It was winter and my parents had been fighting all night. They were short on money and long on relatives who kept “temporarily” moving into our house because they had nowhere else to go.

My brother and I were used to giving up our bedroom. We slept on the couch, something we actually liked because it put us that much closer to the light of our lives, our television.

At night when everyone was asleep, we lay on our pillows watching it with the sound off. We watched Steve Allen’s mouth moving. We watched Johnny Carson’s mouth moving. We watched movies filled with gangsters shooting machine guns into packed rooms, dying soldiers hurling a last grenade and beautiful women crying at windows. Then the sign-off finally came and we tried to sleep.

The morning I snuck out, I woke up filled with a panic about needing to get to school. The sun wasn’t quite up yet but my anxiety was so fierce that I just got dressed, walked quietly across the kitchen and let myself out the back door.

It was quiet outside. Stars were still out. Nothing moved and no one was in the street. It was as if someone had turned the sound off on the world.

I walked the alley, breaking thin ice over the puddles with my shoes. I didn’t know why I was walking to school in the dark. I didn’t think about it. All I knew was a feeling of panic, like the panic that strikes kids when they realize they are lost.

That feeling eased the moment I turned the corner and saw the dark outline of my school at the top of the hill. My school was made up of about 15 nondescript buildings.
portable classrooms set down on a fenced concrete lot in a rundown Seattle neighborhood, but it had the most beautiful view of the Cascade Mountains. You could see them from anywhere on the playfield and you could see them from the windows of my classroom—Room 2.


CAUSE AND EFFECT
Reread lines 47–50. What causes Barry to feel less panicked?
I walked over to the monkey bars and hooked my arms around the cold metal. I stood for a long time just looking across Rainier Valley. The sky was beginning to whiten and I could hear a few birds.

In a perfect world my absence at home would not have gone unnoticed. I would have had two parents in a panic to locate me, instead of two parents in a panic to locate an answer to the hard question of survival during a deep financial and emotional crisis. But in an overcrowded and unhappy home, it’s incredibly easy for any child to slip away. The high levels of frustration, depression and anger in my house made my brother and me invisible. We were children with the sound turned off. And for us, as for the steadily increasing number of neglected children in this country, the only place where we could count on being noticed was at school.

“Hey there, young lady. Did you forget to go home last night?” It was Mr. Gunderson, our janitor, whom we all loved. He was nice and he was funny and he was old with white hair, thick glasses and an unbelievable number of keys. I could hear them jingling as he walked across the playfield. I felt incredibly happy to see him.

He let me push his wheeled garbage can between the different portables as he unlocked each room. He let me turn on the lights and raise the window shades and I saw my school slowly come to life. I saw Mrs. Holman, our school secretary, walk into the office without her orange lipstick on yet. She waved.

I saw the fifth-grade teacher, Mr. Cunningham, walking under the breezeway eating a hard roll. He waved.

And I saw my teacher, Mrs. Claire LeSane, walking toward us in a red coat and calling my name in a very happy and surprised way, and suddenly my throat got tight and my eyes stung and I ran toward her crying. It was something that surprised us both.

It’s only thinking about it now, 28 years later, that I realize I was crying from relief. I was with my teacher, and in a while I was going to sit at my desk, with my crayons and pencils and books and classmates all around me, and for the next six hours I was going to enjoy a thoroughly secure, warm and stable world. It was a world I absolutely relied on. Without it, I don’t know where I would have gone that morning.

Mrs. LeSane asked me what was wrong and when I said, “Nothing,” she seemingly left it at that. But she asked me if I would carry her purse for her, an honor above all honors, and she asked if I wanted to come into Room 2 early and paint.

4. Rainier Valley: a section of southeast Seattle.
She believed in the natural healing power of painting and drawing for troubled children. In the back of her room there was always a drawing table and an easel with plenty of supplies, and sometimes during the day she would come up to you for what seemed like no good reason and quietly ask if you wanted to go to the back table and “make some pictures for Mrs. LeSane.” We all had a chance at it—to sit apart from the class for a while to paint, draw and silently work out impossible problems on 11 × 17 sheets of newsprint.

Drawing came to mean everything to me. At the back table in Room 2, I learned to build myself a life preserver that I could carry into my home.

We all know that a good education system saves lives, but the people of this country are still told that cutting the budget for public schools is necessary, that poor salaries for teachers are all we can manage and that art, music and all creative activities must be the first to go when times are lean.

Before- and after-school programs are cut and we are told that public schools are not made for baby-sitting children. If parents are neglectful temporarily or permanently, for whatever reason, it’s certainly sad, but their unlucky children must fend for themselves. Or slip through the cracks. Or wander in a dark night alone.

We are told in a thousand ways that not only are public schools not important, but that the children who attend them, the children who need them most, are not important either. We leave them to learn from the blind eye of a television, or to the mercy of “a thousand points of light” that can be as far away as stars.

I was lucky. I had Mrs. LeSane. I had Mr. Gunderson. I had an abundance of art supplies. And I had a particular brand of neglect in my home that allowed me to slip away and get to them. But what about the rest of the kids who weren’t as lucky? What happened to them?

By the time the bell rang that morning I had finished my drawing and Mrs. LeSane pinned it up on the special bulletin board she reserved for drawings from the back table. It was the same picture I always drew—a sun in the corner of a blue sky over a nice house with flowers all around it.

Mrs. LeSane asked us to please stand, face the flag, place our right hands over our hearts and say the Pledge of Allegiance. Children across the country do it faithfully. I wonder now when the country will face its children and say a pledge right back.

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5. *slip through the cracks*: become lost or harmed due to negligence.

6. *“a thousand points of light”*: volunteers and charities—a metaphor from a 1989 speech by then-President George H. W. Bush.
Comprehension

1. **Recall** Where does Lynda Barry go after she sneaks out of her house?

2. **Clarify** Why does Barry cry when she sees Mrs. LeSane?

Critical Analysis

3. **Examine Cause and Effect** Look back at the cause-and-effect diagrams you created as you read. Which cause-and-effect relationship do you think is most important to Barry’s argument in favor of public schools?

4. **Interpret Imagery** Skim pages 996 and 998, and note the three places where Barry describes someone or something as having “the sound turned off.” In a graphic like the one shown, tell what she is referring to in each case. Why do you think the image is so powerful to Barry?

5. **Make Inferences** Reread the last paragraph of the essay. What is the “pledge” that Barry wants Americans to make to schoolchildren?

6. **Analyze Author’s Purpose** The evidence Barry offers to persuade the reader comes from a single source—her personal experience. Generalizing from a single experience can be considered overgeneralization. Would you say Barry’s argument is effective, or is her experience is too narrow to achieve her purpose? Explain.

7. **Draw Conclusions** How might Barry’s life have been different if she hadn’t had creative activities at school?

Extension and Challenge

8. **Big Question Activity** Revisit the notes you took on page 994. With your group, discuss whether reading Lynda Barry’s essay changed your opinion about schools’ three most important tasks.

9. **Inquiry and Research** Lynda Barry’s essay encourages us to support public schools for the education and important relationships they offer to all students. Find out about the purpose of public education in the United States. When were public schools established and why? How are they funded? On the basis of what you find out, decide whether Barry’s expectations for schools are reasonable.

**RESEARCH LINKS**

For more on public education in the United States, visit the Research Center at ClassZone.com.
Vocabulary in Context

VOCABULARY PRACTICE
Choose the letter of the term that is most closely related to the boldfaced word.

1. sanctuary: (a) playground, (b) forest, (c) refuge
2. nondescript: (a) plain, (b) ugly, (c) beautiful
3. secure: (a) free, (b) safe, (c) loose
4. neglectful: (a) cruel, (b) bossy, (c) inattentive

VOCABULARY IN WRITING
Using at least two vocabulary words, describe a place you consider a “sanctuary.” You might start like this.

EXAMPLE SENTENCE
The tree house my brothers and I built has become our sanctuary.

VOCABULARY STRATEGY: RELATED WORDS
One strategy that can help you figure out the meaning of an unfamiliar word is to look for a relationship between it and a word you already know. For example, if you don’t know the meaning of the word nondescript, you might recognize a similarity between that word and the word descriptive. You can then guess that nondescript has something to do with how much there is to describe.

PRACTICE Identify a word you know that relates to each numbered word. Then guess at the definition for the numbered word. Check your definition in a dictionary, and write a sentence using the word.

1. criminology        4. inconsolable
2. humanitarian       5. disenchantment
3. logistical         6. elongation

For more practice, go to the Vocabulary Center at ClassZone.com.