

young
adult
ministry
Trend Report



TOPICAL NEWS, RELIABLE DATA &
ACTIONABLE INSIGHTS FOR MINISTRY TODAY



Young People and Education

YAM Trend Report: September, 2023

Key Questions and Summary Findings



Young people (ages 13-39) face myriad education-related challenges as they plan for their future: setbacks during Covid-19 closures and online learning, a seemingly inevitable AI meteor headed for white collar jobs, and an ongoing affordability and debt crisis in higher education, to name just a few.

These challenges raise key questions for young people and those who care about them:

- How are young people approaching education today?
- Why educate/pursue an education, in this brave new world?
- What might education look like going forward?

This month's newsletter will discuss how these questions intersect with current trends among young people, including that most young people plan to attend college, fund their schooling themselves, and utilize online platforms to supplement their education.

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WHO WE ARE

We are a team of seminary faculty and church practitioners seeking to support and encourage church leaders as they engage youth and young adults (13–39-year-olds) in their ministries. We hope to provide an accessible overview of current trends in North American society that can help to inform youth and young adult ministries across church traditions. We believe that a careful analysis and engagement with cultural and social trends is crucial to ministry with young people and we aim to support practitioners by making that analysis “short and sweet” for the busy pastor and church leader.

Team Member Highlight!



Rev. Rich Nelson is an Episcopal priest, writer, and spiritual director. He is currently working on a Masters in Christian Formation at Virginia Theological Seminary. Over the last twenty years, Rich has served in both Episcopal and Lutheran (ELCA) congregations, as a chaplain at an Episcopal day school, and as the Episcopal chaplain to Texas A&M University. Rich’s faith formation resource,

following *The Way*, is centered around living a life built on the Great Commandment. He is the founder of an ecumenical nonprofit ministry addressing poverty and racism in rural Texas. Recently, he co-founded Middleway Urban Monastery, a spirituality center for people not affiliated with the church. Rich is an Associate Member of the Iona Community in Scotland and a member of Spiritual Directors International. You can learn more by visiting www.revrichnelson.com.

“WE HAVE NEARLY
1.2 MILLION
FEWER STUDENTS
THAN IN 2019.”

Education Goals and Trends for Young People

After two years of dramatically declining enrollment in college, a recent [study](#) from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (NSCRC) reports that college enrollments dropped 0.5 percent from the spring of 2022 to this past spring. That represents a dramatic slowing of pandemic-era enrollment trends that saw, for example, a 3.1 percent drop from spring ‘21 to ‘22. This stabilization is still notable, however, as the director of the NSCRC Doug Shapiro [explained](#) this past May:

“We have nearly 1.2 million fewer students than in 2019.”

We’ll get into some possible explanations for these trends in the pages ahead, but first, there is good news: **more than 80% of middle and high school students plan to go to college.** These young people are also cost-conscious when thinking about college, as more than half state that they would rather attend a state school that is less expensive.

Education Affordability Challenge for Young People

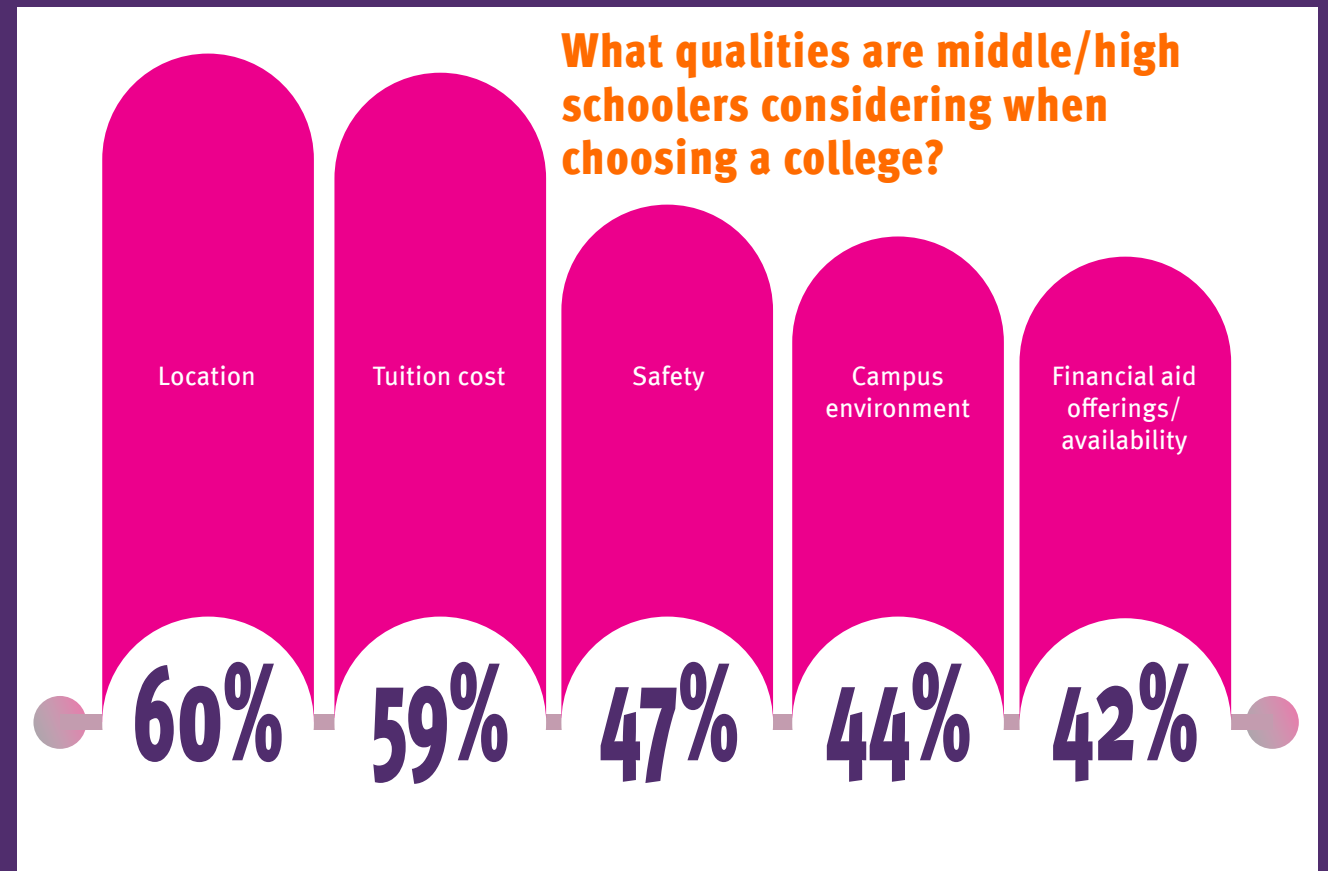
Most middle and high schoolers consider location and tuition cost as the two most important qualities when choosing a college, though safety, the campus environment, and financial aid offerings also rank relatively high.

With location and tuition cost ranking a close first and second on this list, we should remember that the two are connected: **in-state tuition is often much lower compared to private or out-of-state schools**. Along with an increased attentiveness to affordability matters, there is also an increase in young people [pursuing apprenticeships](#) after high school rather than going directly to college.

Delaying Higher Ed and Other Options



As more and more Gen Xers and Millennials struggle with burdensome debt loads, Gen Z is taking a more cautious and critical approach to their educational and professional development. If that means a few years in the workforce or learning a trade after high school instead of immediately enrolling in college, that may not be a bad thing. It gives them time to mature and learn more about the adult world prior to committing their financial futures to a career path they're less-than-sure about. This experience might help them **hone in on what they want to do professionally** while also providing some **financial backing to pursue those goals**.



How will they pay for it?

While many middle and high school students believe their parents will be paying their college bills, college students report that they are paying for college themselves, often with a combination of **scholarships and financial aid**. Slightly more than a third reported that their parents were paying, so a decent number of those middle and high school students may have been right. As the loan crisis weighs on Millennials and Gen Xers, **less than a quarter of current college students reported that they were paying for school with loans**. We should note, however, that the total number of current students reporting their loan status will likely increase across each year of undergrad education as access to local scholarships dries up.

As the student loan crisis continues to balloon ([Forbes](#) puts the current total of student loan debt at \$1.75 trillion owed by about 43 million borrowers) and many current students have parents still paying off their own loans, young people are primed to consider affordability above (almost) all else.



Alternative and Informal Education

Thanks to widespread technological advances, more and more young people are turning to alternative sources of education. [Podcasts](#) have exploded in popularity over the past decade, and online learning platforms are becoming more mainstream. In fact, **60% of Gen Z would rather use an online study platform to learn something rather than one-on-one tutoring.**

Popular online programs/platforms include Quizlet, Kahoot!, and Duolingo. Young people use these platforms to help study for exams, take practice quizzes, and learn languages. Current trends point to these platforms growing in importance over the next two decades, as **more than half of Millennial parents report that their kids (young Gen Z and Gen Alpha) are using these apps.**



Headfirst Into **Online Learning?**



There are both [benefits and drawbacks](#) to online learning. While online platforms can make educational attainment more accessible in some ways (anyone with Wifi can get onto the internet), other obstacles prevent a truly equitable distribution. Living conditions can affect the convenience and even possibility of internet use at home, and many forms of online education require some form of payment.

There are many other concerns on this issue, and the church would do well to attend to these concerns as we **pursue equitable education access** for all. Online educational platforms are likely to increase in popularity in the future, so church leaders who consider these issues now in anticipation of such changes will be more prepared when they arrive.

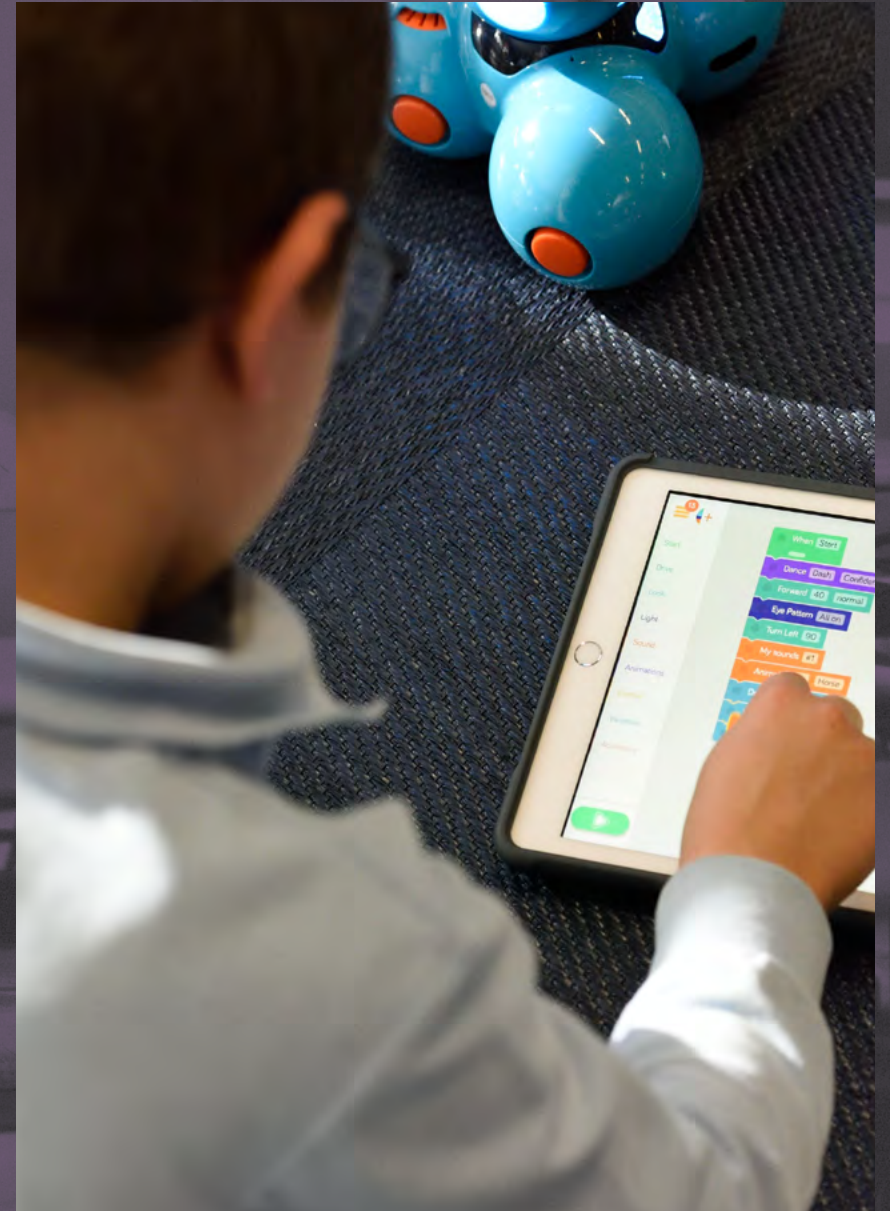


The Attention Economy and Education



The use of online learning platforms for educational purposes is facing a major challenge as this nation's first generation of children enter a schooling environment where it is the norm. Though the impacts of this shift will be studied in greater detail by sociologists and psychologists in the years to come, one alarm bell is already ringing: **more than half of Millennial parents are worried about their child(ren)'s attention span.** These parents also agree that schools must adapt by finding new ways to keep school children engaged.

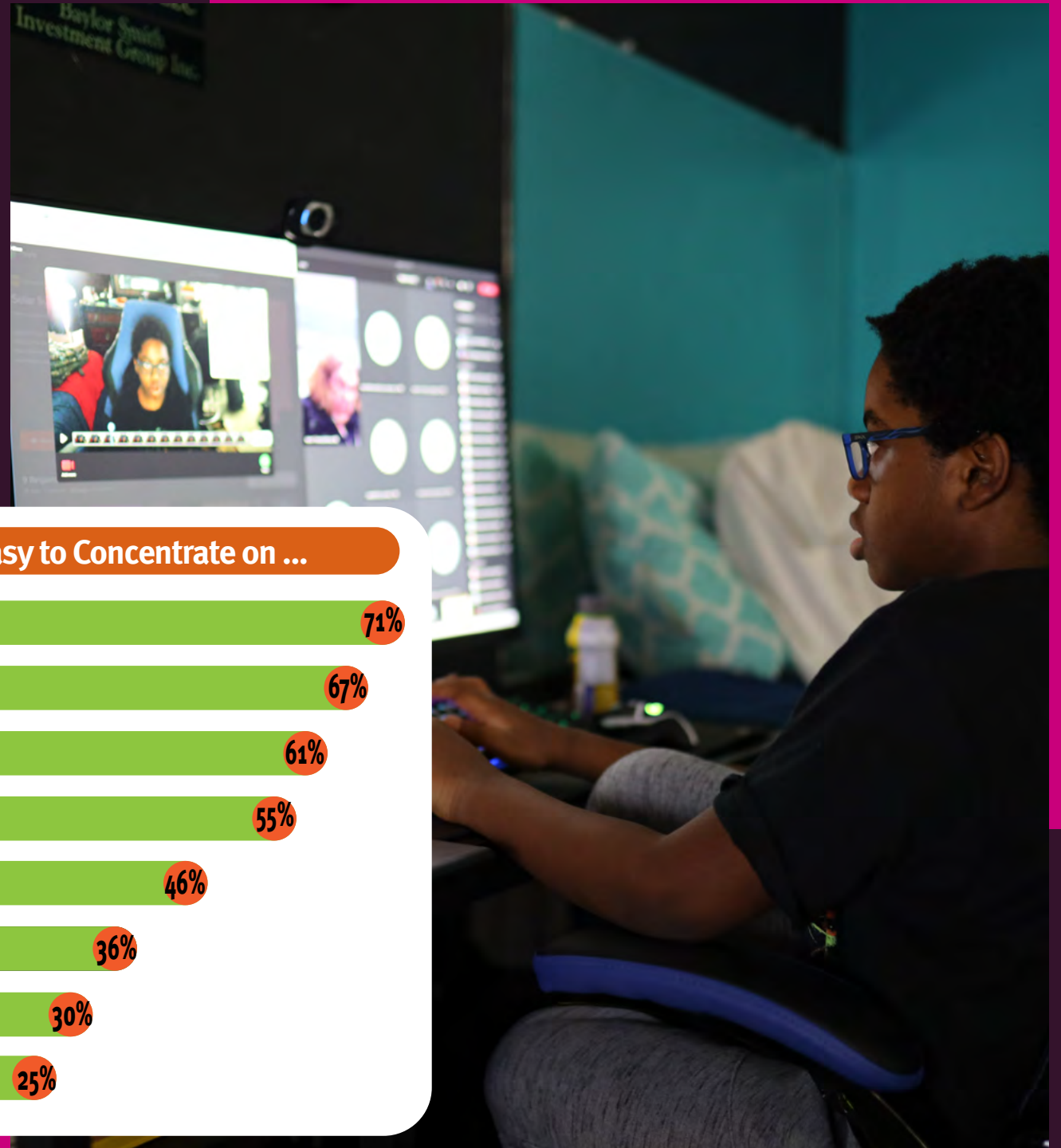
One of the ways their schools are attempting to keep them engaged is with an increasingly hybrid learning environment—iPads and laptops alongside pen and paper. Videos have been in classroom use for decades, but interactive virtual educational tools have become much more mainstream in the past five years and especially since the pandemic shutdowns.



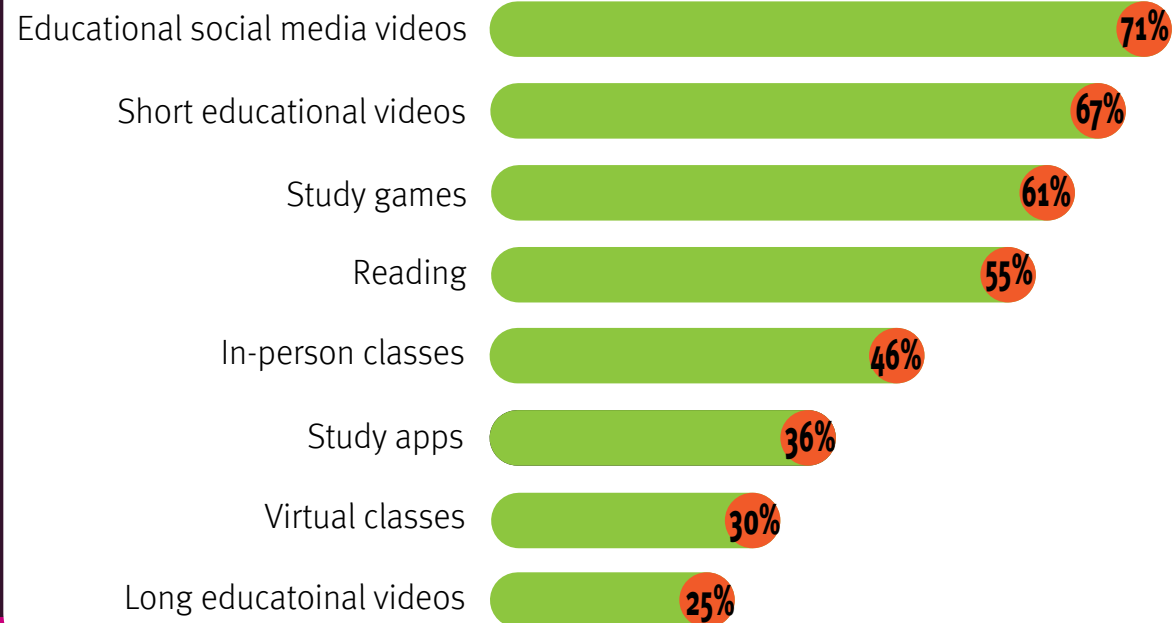
Concentration and Education

Despite parental concerns about attention spans and young people, YPulse research found that **most young people say that it is relatively easy to focus on reading and study games**. Virtual classes, on the other hand, were much harder for many young people—less than a third said these were easy to concentrate on.

This data indicates that the (alleged) decline in attention span among young people and the virtualization of their education will not be easy to navigate. If young people still find study games and reading relatively easy (though not as easy as short videos or educational social media videos), **then perhaps the solution has less to do with making education more entertaining and more to do with increasing the accessibility of positive environments for learning.**



How many students say it is easy to Concentrate on ...



Creating an Educational Safe Space?

Churches could play a major role in these educational trends by providing a space for young people to study, collaborate, access free Wifi and more. While many young people may struggle to find or establish a suitable learning environment at home, most churches sit relatively empty for most of the school week. What if churches opened their doors to young people who need Wifi and a place to conduct their school work?

Though thousands of public libraries around the country already provide a service of this kind, doing so in a known space could be a game-changer for the library-reluctant. Furthermore, church leaders and volunteers could organize to provide a kind of lightly-supervised study hall space during after school times. In communities where parents must work long hours (and/or more than one job) to make ends meet, **providing this kind of supervised space in churches could be a major service to community members and even be a form of outreach ministry.** Today, [more than 7.7 million adults work two or more jobs](#) across the U.S. and mainline church traditions are increasingly becoming a [social network for the wealthy and educated](#). If the church is to reach all people in our community, and create a welcoming space for all, more intentional effort must be made to cut across socioeconomic dividing lines. An intervention such as an educational safe space could be a helpful start.

In addition to providing a study-hall-like space, some churches recruited retired parishioners with skills and experience that could be useful to students. This included teachers, social workers, librarians, coaches and more.

Try it:

Discuss with your congregation and see which volunteers might be willing and able to support this kind of program in your context. Consider recruiting community members who have relevant skills to see if they might also be interested in getting involved.

Educational Resource Spaces

Though it will require careful thought and congregational engagement to pull off, creating an educational safe space in our communities might be more critical than ever. A recent UNESCO [report](#) details **how the education-tech boom during the height of Covid-19 school shutdowns had a massively negative effect on poorer communities around the world and hypercharged existing educational inequalities**. While more-resourced communities made rapid transitions to Zoom schooling and virtual programming, the national conversation steered away from more affordable means of providing take-home education that would be accessible in poorer and working-class communities.

The church is called to care for the marginalized, the needy, the poor and sick. Providing educational spaces in our church facilities could be **an important step toward correcting recent educational inequalities and supporting the most vulnerable among us as they seek to make their way in the world.**





Education as the Practice of Freedom from bell hooks

Teacher and social critic bell hooks offers a helpful way of imagining what these educational resource spaces might be, and how we might conceive of them in our churches. In her book, *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), **hooks describes education not as a way of learning how to better exploit the world around us, but as the practice of freedom.** She demonstrates how this view connects to a sense of sacred calling:

“To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn. That learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred; who believe that our work is not merely to share information **but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students. To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin**” (p. 13).



Educational resource spaces and bell hooks



Pedagogies tending in a utilitarian direction are among those most challenged by hooks's perspective on education. Instead of seeing education as a means to a productive labor force, hooks challenges us to see something deeper, something the church might be better equipped to support than our under-resourced national system of education. For the churches that decide to dedicate their time and resources to creating an educational resource space for young people in their community, hooks's viewpoint about education is essential.

How might we support young people in their pursuit of education and knowledge, and how might our support be changed when we view our role as a sharing in their spiritual and intellectual growth rather than an administering of information to them?

Education in Crisis: America in 2023

The American public schooling crisis today is a complex phenomenon that would require a deep-dive beyond the limits of this publication. A short list of some aspects of this crisis include the following:

- [94% of U.S. teachers routinely pay](#) out-of-pocket for basic school supplies
- Public schools are primarily funded by local taxes, rather than state or federal, [exacerbating social inequalities](#) by providing **the highest levels of public education to the most affluent areas and the lowest levels of public education to the poorest areas.**
- School-choice vouchers, growing in popularity at the national level, **take public funds out of public schools** and funnel them to private, magnet, and charter schools ([many of which use legal loopholes to operate for-profit](#))

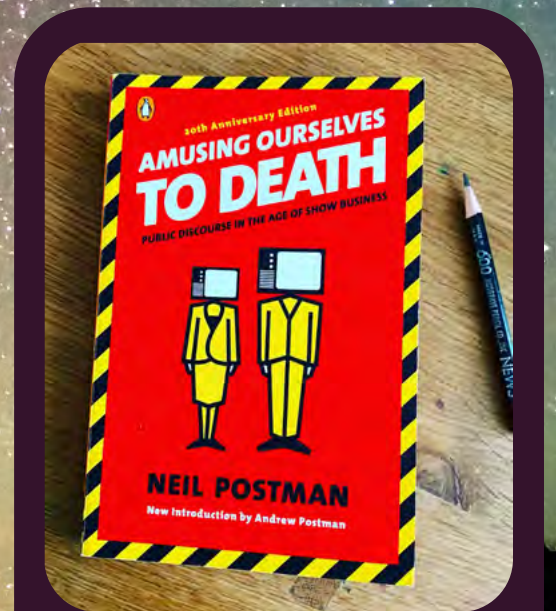
These are all issues that require various interventions to resolve, and each requires serious engagement from the church. In the remainder of this month's newsletter, however, we will turn our attention away from some of these practical and political crises and towards the philosophical, psychological, and social crises of our education system today.



The Medium Is the Metaphor

In Neil Postman's 1985 book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, the author describes the relationship between form and content while riffing off of the famous aphorism of his one-time professor, Marshall McLuhan: "the medium is the message" (9).

This meant that **"each medium, like language itself, makes possible a unique mode of discourse by providing a new orientation for thought, for expression, for sensibility"** (11). Postman believes this position, while true, does not go far enough in the modern era. Because the medium of entertainment and television is primarily visual and emotionally oriented, it is not, properly speaking, a message at all. Modern media forms "are rather like metaphors, working by unobtrusive but powerful implication to enforce their special definitions of reality" (ibid.).



Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, York: Methuen & Co., 1987. Please note that the book was originally published in the U.S. in 1985, but the page numbers cited here correspond to Methuen's 1987 British edition.

Form and Content

The medium through which we communicate shapes our abilities to think, reflect, and engage meaningfully with one another. When this is done through writing out the content of our thoughts, **the act of writing forces us into a coherent and rational ordering of those thoughts.** But when we convey our thoughts through images, no such discipline is required—**the image or video stands in for rational explication and subordinates it to the impression left by the image/video.** Rational discourse and reflection are short-circuited by emotional appeals and the natural social desire for inclusion and connection (something that is much more powerful face-to-face than when mediated by the written word).

The form of our culture (whether written or image-based) determines the content that can be shared. As Postman quips when describing the limitations of smoke-signals as a mode of communication: **“You cannot use smoke to do philosophy. Its form excludes the content”** (7).





Though there are many ways Postman's analysis can be applied to our contemporary culture, the connections to education stand out. Some key questions we must consider as we go forward are the following:

- How does the **change in the form** of education today (from classroom and textbook based to a higher level of virtual, video, and other online formats), **impact both the content and our ability to meaningfully integrate that content into our understanding of the world?**
- What dangers to a proper understanding of content are present in these adjusted forms? That is, does the change to a virtual education environment lend itself to higher levels of disinformation, misinformation, and outright falsehoods? How can we prevent such drift if, when, and where it occurs?
- How can virtual education enhance in-person and textbook-based education? **Are there subjects that lend themselves more readily to virtual forms, and others in which such media should be prohibited?** How can we deliberate such things as a community?

[Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, York: Methuen & Co., 1987.]



The End of Education

The questions posed above are fundamentally questions about the *means* to an education—virtual or in-person, interactive or reading-based, etc. But in another of Postman’s books, *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School*, the author explores a more crucial problem: **the ends, goals or purpose of an education far outweigh the means**. This is because we adopt various means throughout our lifetime (and as sociocultural conditions change) as we pursue our own education in life. When we step back and consider these ends, Postman finds the ends of economic utility, consumerism, technology (some of the most important implicit and explicit ends of modern education in America) to be wanting. These ends are incapable, in Postman’s view, of providing the basis for maintaining an expansive and worthwhile public education.

Postman argues, instead, that education must orient itself around a unifying narrative that provides a broad and deep view towards the ends of education. The second part of the book explores five potential narratives in this regard, each of which is worthy of consideration.

If the crisis in education has more to do with ends than means, how might this reshape the ways in which we encourage young people as they pursue an education? What does this mean for the church as we confront the hollowness of such narratives as economic utility and consumerism as reasons to attain an education? As college enrollments have declined in recent years, are these Gen Zers ahead of the curve in sensing some of the emptiness of these narratives and searching for something more?

As society considers and debates these questions (or avoids them as too difficult to engage), the church can emerge as an important space for these deliberations. Furthermore, the church may be better suited than many civic organizations to have deeper conversations about the broader ends that we pursue in education. Consider hosting such a discussion group in your church today!



Neil Postman, *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School*, New York: Vintage Books, 1996.]



Additional Resources for Possible Gap-Year and Discernment Periods

- [Young Adult Service Corps](#)
- Society of Saint John the Evangelist's [Monastic Residency Program](#)
- [Tsedaqah](#) at Liverpool Cathedral
- [The Community of St. Anselm](#)
- [Camas](#) at Iona
- [Taizé](#)
- [The Wake Up Network](#) (Zen in the lineage of Thich Nhat Hanh)