

## But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids

### [Why Do We Have To Go To School?](#)

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[00:00:21] (**Jane Lindholm**) This is *But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids*, from Vermont Public Radio. I'm Jane Lindholm. On this podcast, we take questions from curious kids just like you from literally all over the world.

[00:00:35] We've gotten questions from kids on all continents except for Antarctica, which makes sense, because there is not really a permanent resident population of kids there. Anyway, you send your questions on whatever you're curious about from wherever you are in the world and we find answers. We get to learn something new with every episode.

[00:00:56] For kids here in the United States and Canada, the end of summer and beginning of fall often means the start of -

[00:01:10] a new school year!

[00:01:12] New pencils, new desks, new routines, new books and workbooks, sometimes new teachers and friends. Even new schools sometimes.

[00:01:21] And that's got a lot of you curious.

(**Marcelo**) Hi, my name is Marcelo. I'm 10 years old. I'm from Bogota, Colombia. And my question is, why does school exist?

[00:01:34] (**Emily Rauscher**) I'm Emily Rauscher. I'm an associate professor of sociology at Brown University.

[00:01:40] (**Jane Lindholm**) In addition to teaching college students, professors also do research. And Emily Rauscher researches schools.

[00:01:47] (**Emily Rauscher**) I study education and inequality, and I teach a class called, What Do Schools Do?

[00:01:54] (**Jane Lindholm**) Well, that sounds right in line with the questions you've been sending us. So, we put them to Emily. You heard Marcello. Samuel is wondering the same thing:

[00:02:02] (**Samuel**) I'm seven years old. I live in London. My question is, why the schools exist?

[00:02:11] (**Emily Rauscher**) We have schools for a lot of reasons. They do a lot of things for us, for individuals and for our society,

[00:02:22] you know, groups of people. They help kids learn skills, like reading, writing and math, and also the ability to think critically, to see things from multiple views, so that then when they grow up, they can make informed decisions when they vote in elections. But schools also do other things. They help kids learn social skills, how to get along with

others, how to talk with authority figures like teachers. And then even beyond teaching skills, schools do a lot of other things for us. They take care of children during the day so that their parents know they're safe while they're working.

[00:03:02] And schools provide a sense of community.  
**(Jane Lindholm)** In some places, especially rural places,

[00:03:09] Emily says schools are often gathering spots for meetings and community events,

**(Emily Rauscher)** and school activities like sports events or music performances bring people together for happy and supportive reasons.

[00:03:23] And then at the national level, schools also help build a sense of community.

[00:03:29] So all students in our country, in public schools, learn about the Revolutionary War, presidents of the United States, the importance of voting and contributing to our country. And these things help us to see our country as one collective rather than just a many splintered groups.

[00:03:49] **(Jane Lindholm)** So there are lots of reasons for having schools that go well beyond just teaching kids to read and write. We also gave your question about why schools exist to Rodney Robinson:

**(Rodney Robinson)** a teacher

[00:04:01] at the Virgie Binford Education Center, a school for the students aged six to twelve, in Richmond, Virginia. And I'm currently the National Teacher of the Year.

[00:04:10] **(Jane Lindholm)** How did you get that award and what did it feel like?

[00:04:12] **(Rodney Robinson)** Oh, it's amazing! It's just so exciting. It's a chance for me to talk about my students. My students are the best students on Earth. It's a chance for me to tell their story.

[00:04:21] **(Jane Lindholm)** Tell us a little bit about the school that you teach at.

[00:04:24] **(Rodney Robinson)** Well, my school is inside the Richmond Juvenile Detention Center, so my kids are detained, because they made mistakes. But I often tell them a setback is sometimes what you need in life to move ahead.

[00:04:38] And so we just try to refocus, reset and do as much as we can to get them all on task and to get all my students graduate.

[00:04:47] **(Jane Lindholm)** Maybe not all of our listeners, our young listeners, will know what a juvenile detention center is. Can you explain that?

[00:04:54] **(Rodney Robinson)** Detention center is jail. My students have made mistakes. They've broken the law and they're in trouble. And so, they come to jail. But there's still school. You never stop learning no matter where you are in life. And so, while they're in jail, my job is to give them a good education and prepare them well for the society.

[00:05:12] **(Jane Lindholm)** So, education really is for everyone, even for kids who are in difficult situations. That's one of the reasons we have public school in the United States and many other countries. At least in theory, every young person is supposed to be able to get a good education, that will prepare them to be successful adults. Whether they have a lot of money in their family or just a little, whether they live with parents or relatives or foster parents or in a group home, whether they live in the city or way out in the countryside. And even young people who have broken the law or made some mistakes, still deserve to get a good education. And they certainly do with Rodney Robinson, since he's the national teacher of the year! We asked Rodney how he would answer Marcelo's question.

[00:05:58] **(Rodney Robinson)** Schools exist because the world is so big and it's important that you know everything that you need to know to be successful in this world. So, school just prepares you for when you're grown up - and you can leave your parents' house and go out into the world and do great things. And when you do those great things, you're going to be able to thank school for preparing you for it.

[00:06:17] **(Jane Lindholm)** Why do we have to do it in school, though? Why can't it be something that your parents just teach you?

[00:06:21] **(Rodney Robinson)** Because a lot of the time parents are busy, and parents are dealing with the world themselves. A lot of parents tend to do that as well. Parents and schools work together to make sure that you're prepared for the world.

**(Jane Lindholm)** School, at least in the United States, is mandatory.

[00:06:35] You have to go to school. So, what if you don't want to? Why should you?

[00:06:40] **(Rodney Robinson)** Even if you don't want to go to school, sometimes you have to do things that you don't want to do to be prepared for life. And I didn't like school growing up either. But as I got older, I found subjects, I found band. I really loved band. So, I could go to school and play an instrument. And so, if I had to do everything else just to play this instrument, I would do it because that's what I loved to do. So, the key is to find a part of school that you really, really love, and just stay dedicated to that.

[00:07:09] **(Jane Lindholm)** Do you have something like that, a subject or a class that you really enjoy? I like what Rodney says, that you can use that thing you love to find a way to enjoy school, to make you excited to go, even if there are other things that might feel hard or sometimes boring. At least there's something you love mixed in with the things you don't like as much, helping motivate you to stick around and learn all the things you need to know. That kind of happened to Rodney. Band helped him get through elementary and middle school and all the way through high school. And then he says college was one of the best experiences of his life. It was when he was in college that Rodney realized the need for education, and he fell in love with teaching history. As for me, I really loved school, especially middle school and high school. But I did struggle in elementary school when my family moved, and I went to a new school. I just found it really hard to know what the assignments were and to get them done on time. Sometimes I had to come in early and do extra math in the mornings before any other kids got to school. And so, I sometimes felt like school was really hard and confusing. But in fifth grade, I had a teacher named Mr. Randall. He was so great! And he got me so excited for the possibility of reading, and history, and understanding the world. I think we did something like 13 field trips, and I can still remember the first book report or research report that I did that I really, really felt proud of. It was about a man named Admiral Richard Byrd who explored

Antarctica. And it just, I don't know, it sparked something in me that I've been able to carry with me now through adulthood. So, I'll forever be grateful to Mr. Randall for helping to give me that love of learning that carried me through high school. So, whether you like school or not now, you know, there's still a chance to find things that you love even more or find things that really excite and energize you. So, don't give up. And if you're really enjoying school, keep it up. Here's another question you've sent us.

[00:09:19] **(Kai)** Hi, my name is Kai. I live in Brookline, Massachusetts, and I am five years old.

[00:09:26] And my question is, when do kids start going to school?

**(Jane Lindholm)** As important as schools are and as central as they are to the lives of most kids growing up today, public schools, where all kids can go and learn for free, are really a somewhat new idea. Before there were public schools, many kids still learned things like reading and math, but they would learn those things at home from their parents if their parents knew how to read and write. Or from a tutor who came to their house, if their parents could afford that. Or, Emily Rauscher says, there was another option.

**(Emily Rauscher)** A long time ago, a lot of learning took place in religious schools or church schools.

[00:10:08] But in the United States, we believe in religious freedom. And so, one role of the school was to help kids learn to grow up into an adult that worked well in our society in a way that was separate from church or religion.

[00:10:28] **(Jane Lindholm)** Schools run by religious organizations or with religious education as part of the curriculum still exist and lots of kids go to them. Maybe you do, but they're not public schools, at least not in the United States. As Emily pointed out, the United States has a strong history of separation of religion and government. So, public schools, essentially government-run schools are not the same as religious schools. In many parts of the world, schools run by religious groups are still very much a part of the culture. Okay, as long as we're learning the history, what else?

[00:11:02] **(Emily Rauscher)** In the early colonial times in the United States, local communities established a school and paid for a school. But then, as more and more people came, immigrated, to the U.S. -- different types of people, each state started to require children to attend school. And Massachusetts was the first state to require kids to go to school, and that was in 1852. And then, all the other states passed similar laws. And Mississippi was the last state to require school attendance in 1918.

[00:11:38] **(Jane Lindholm)** That's only 100 years ago. In the time period that public schools were being built and opened around the United States, there were many leaders who argued for these schools, saying it was for the benefit of everyone to have schools to educate all children.

**(Emily Rauscher)** In documents from the late 1800s, education leaders wrote about school as a right for all children, and that if parents were poor, this is what they wrote: "*If parents were poor or irresponsible, children should not lose that right*". And then others wrote about schools as an important way to integrate new immigrants, to help them become "good citizens". And so, for these leaders, schools were a key part of a democracy or a democratic government.

[00:12:26] **(Jane Lindholm)** And states agreed that those schools were worth paying for. Everyone who pays taxes in the United States now pays for public schools. Basically, taxes are money that people give to the government. They're required to give it to the government, to pay for things that are considered public good or things that are important enough that everyone should have to pay for them, even if you individually don't necessarily use them. So even people who don't have children still contribute to paying for public school because we think of it as a public good. All of us benefit when all kids get an education. And that's part of why schools were developed with the goal of being equalizers -- that will give everybody a chance to succeed in life, not just people who have the most money. And Emily says that basically works.

[00:13:15] **(Emily Rauscher)** For example, kids who come from a low-income background or low socio-economic status background, who make it to college and go through college, they have essentially equal chances on the job market compared to those who come from more advantaged backgrounds.

[00:13:37] **(Jane Lindholm)** Again, it's only been about 100 years that all kids in the U.S. have been required to attend school. Now, some of you listening in the United States or other countries with mandatory public schools might be saying, wait, I don't go to a school. I'm homeschooled. And some of you go to school, but not your local public school. Maybe you go to a private school. Emily says that's because in the United States, our society values choice.

[00:14:05] **(Emily Rauscher)** Families can opt to send their children to a religious school or homeschool them.

[00:14:11] **(Jane Lindholm)** And some families choose other kinds of private schools. In private schools, even though your family or the adults in your family who work, are paying for public schools, they might pay more to send you to a different school. That's called tuition, where the school charges money for you to go to it and you pay it individually as a family. And often people choose private schools because, for one reason or another, that school best meets the needs of your family. Most countries don't actually allow homeschooling. The United States does. But some don't. And some countries don't even allow private schools. But Emily says public schools exist throughout the world.

[00:14:52] **(Emily Rauscher)** The idea of having a public education option is often tied to the idea of being a nation. So, a new country will always work to establish its own education system, partly to help kids develop an identity related to that country and, you know, teach the country's language in the schools, and also to teach kids how to be adults in that type of country. Often, it's a new democratic country. So, thinking about how to vote and things like that.

[00:15:30] Coming up, why is there 12 grades in school?

[00:15:48] **(Jane Lindholm)** This is *But Why: a Podcast for Curious Kids*. I'm Jane Lindholm. On today's episode, we're learning all about schools, why we have to go and why going to school is basically your job when you're a kid.

[00:16:00] We're concentrating mostly on the American school system, because we know it best and most of our listeners are in the United States. Although, as we've said, we know you come from all over the world, but it would be way too long an episode if we talked

about every country's school system. But a lot of the systems in the countries where you might be listening also have similarities to what we're talking about today.

[00:16:24] **(Astra)** Hello, my name's Astra. I'm eight years old, and I'm from Narberth, Pennsylvania. My question is, why is there 12 grades in school? Why isn't there more?

[00:16:34] **(Jane Lindholm)** Here's professor and researcher Emily Rauscher.

[00:16:37] **(Emily Rauscher)** Originally, there were no grades in school and children worked on things or skills that they needed to learn depending on how much they already knew. So that a 16-year old could be working on the same thing as a 5-year old.

[00:16:51] **(Jane Lindholm)** This is kind of the one room schoolhouse of the olden days you might have heard about, where students would work on what they needed to learn at their own pace and kids could go to school or stay home depending on when they were needed at their home. When schools became mandatory, that's when grades started to develop.

[00:17:08] **(Emily Rauscher)** So as all kids started to go to schools, schools created separate grades to organize students and teachers. That way, teachers weren't having to try to teach to so many different levels, skill levels, all at once.

[00:17:20] **(Jane Lindholm)** Rodney Robinson, our Teacher of the Year, says going up to 12th grade is what you usually need to do to graduate from high school. But 12th grade is not the limit.

[00:17:29] **(Rodney Robinson)** You can go to school every day for the rest of your life. There's college. You can get bachelor's degrees. You can get a master's degree, you can get a Ph.D., and there's no limit to the number of those you can get. So school is forever. School can go and go and go, until you just don't want to learn anymore. So, there's twelve grades that are required for you to go. The rest of school is optional. But I'd say keep going and learn as much as you can.

[00:17:54] **(Jane Lindholm)** Is there something special about being, you know, 17 or 18 or 19 that, that makes sense for the end of the mandatory or the required number of school years, do you think?

[00:18:05] **(Rodney Robinson)** Well, yeah, we would have to understand that in our country, 17 and 18 is when you're considered what, 18 is when you're considered an adult. And once you're an adult, school has prepared you to make decisions on your own. So, you can make the decision of whether or not you want to go to school anymore. Some people choose not to. Some people go to school every day. So, once you are 18, you complete the 12 years of school, then you're ready for the world. And the world lets you decide what you want to do after that.

[00:18:34] **(Jane Lindholm)** And these rules around school change over time. For example, kindergarten was added to school after the idea of grades one through twelve became common. So, actually we have thirteen grades if you count kindergarten. But now many public schools offer preschool or pre-K for kids as young as three and four. That's two more grades. And there's a discussion going on in many states about whether the first two years of college should be available to all students for free. Whether or not your school has twelve grades also depends on what country you live in. In some countries, mandatory

school might end at 11th grade or earlier. And, in lots of countries, they're not called grades at all. You might call them forms or years or something else entirely. Speaking of what we call things, here's another question.

[00:19:22] **(Sam)** I'm Sam from Sydney, Australia and I'm seven. And my question is, why do you call teachers by their last name?

[00:19:32] **(Jane Lindholm)** Here's Rodney Robinson again.

[00:19:34] **(Rodney Robinson)** Well, there's a tradition of respect in this world. And so, people feel that it's very respectful to call teachers by their last name, or Mr. or Mrs. As for myself, I let my kids call me whatever name makes them feel comfortable in their class. For example, a lot of my kids call me Big Rod, and that doesn't bother me because it creates a level of trust that they could feel so familiar with me that they can call me Big Rod. So, it really depends on the teacher. But traditionally it's all about respect. So, you call people by their last names to show them that you respect them.

[00:20:09] **(Jane Lindholm)** Whether you call your teachers by their last name, plus a title like Mr. or Ms., maybe Dr. or Sister or Sir, probably depends on the kind of school you go to and may vary from teacher to teacher. Many years ago, it was actually considered polite for kids to always address adults using titles and last names. Even for your friends' parents or your bus driver, maybe you still do. This is becoming a little less common. Now you might call the adults in your life by their first names. Some of you might even call your parents by their first names. Rodney says he also puts thought into what he calls his students.

**(Rodney Robinson)** Because it's important to value students' names. If a student says, hey, I want to be called this, then you respect the student and you call the student by that name. It empowers the student. It makes them feel stronger, when your name is called by the name that you like.

[00:21:02] **(Jane Lindholm)** Now, if you don't know what to call your teacher, they'll probably tell you on the first day of school. And if you forget, just ask them. But you should also feel empowered to make sure your teachers and your friends are calling you by the name you like to use. So, if they're saying it wrong, maybe they're mispronouncing it, don't be afraid to tell them they want to call you by the right name. Emily Rauscher has one more thing she wants you all to keep in mind as you head to school.

**(Emily Rauscher)** You and your families have power.

[00:21:30] We also shape schools. Schools shape us, but we also shape schools. So, we can all think about how we could help schools do an even better job of, you know, for example, including kids who may feel a bit different than others, who may feel left out helping support teachers. Public schools do an awful lot for kids and families and local communities.

[00:21:56] **(Jane Lindholm)** And Rodney Robinson has some last advice too.

**(Rodney Robinson)** I often tell my students that education is not preparation for life. Education is life itself.

[00:22:06] Learning is so much fun. The more you know, the more prepared you are for this world. So just continue the learn, no matter what.

[00:22:14] (**Jane Lindholm**) Big Rod, as a teacher who grew up maybe not loving school until you found the thing that you loved and I'm sure you've taught students who didn't really find that school was giving them what they had hoped for, that they can't find that thing. Do you have advice for kids who feel like, I don't really like school? I know I have to go, but I don't, I'm not liking it. What should they do?

[00:22:35] (**Rodney Robinson**) I'd say look for friends or look for teachers. Things are always easier when you have a group of friends to work with. I know I made it through school, and I made it to college because I've had a strong group of friends and we were all working together to make sure we were successful. So, find a friend. It could be someone in your class. It could be an adult. And it could be a teacher. It could be the school custodian. But just find a friend and that friend will help you and encourage you as much as possible to stay in school and to keep going.

[00:23:13] (**Jane Lindholm**) That's it for this episode. Have you learned something about schools today? I hope so. Maybe it was even a little fun, although probably not as fun as band. Not all learning takes place in schools, but the education you get in school sets you on the path to becoming an adult who can succeed in the world. You should know, though, and I'll tell you right now, even when you're done with school, you never stop learning. I should know. I have a job where I have to learn something new every day. But my favorite things to learn are the answers to your amazing questions. If you have a question again about anything, have an adult record it. It's easy to do on a smartphone or tablet using a voice recording app. Then you can have your adult send the file to [questions@butwhykids.org](mailto:questions@butwhykids.org). If talking is difficult or frightening for you, or you don't have that kind of technology, you can also have your adult

[00:24:07] just send us a written question by e-mail. Now we can't answer every question we get, but we do love to hear where you live, and what you're wondering about, and what you sound like. But Why is produced by Melody Bodette and me, Jane Lindholm, at Vermont Public Radio. Our theme music is by Luke Reynolds. Thank you so much to Rodney Robinson and Emily Rauscher for helping to answer questions today. We'll be back in two weeks with an all new episode. Until then, stay curious!