

Creative Instruction and Its Enemies

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Parents battle the education monolith in the COVID-19 shutdown wars.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the teachers unions and others in the education establishment as a Hydra that will go to great lengths to insure that in-person learning is denied throughout the country. In Boston, the teachers union is suing the mayor and other city officials to shut down all schools after a partial reopening. In New York, Governor Andrew Cuomo was threatened by New York City's United Federation of Teachers with a lawsuit, and dutifully shut down schools in Brooklyn and Queens. American Federation of Teachers president Randi Weingarten warned that strikes were possible in Texas, Florida and Arizona due to unsafe working conditions in schools. And, in an attempt for the 2020 "Bad Taste Award," two teachers with child-sized coffins mounted on their cars took part in a 100-vehicle caravan to protest returning to real school in northern Virginia.

None of the above has ever acknowledged that not one child in Sweden has died from Covid, and that Swedish teachers did not suffer unusually high rates of infection, even though the country never closed schools for those under 16. Additionally, Swedish students were never forced to wear masks.

As teachers stumble through online learning (only 22 percent admit to being prepared to effectively do so), increasing numbers of families – who have had little if any say in any reopening decisions – are unhappy. Keri Rodrigues, co-founder of the National Parents Union, an activist group advocating for parental input in public school decisions, insists that half of U.S. parents have had no say in the reopening process. Parents in New York City protested Gov. Andrew Cuomo's closure plans Wednesday, saying their schools are safe and their children need in-person classes. Across the country, a group called "Reopen California Schools" has organized a "Zoom Out" campaign. Syndie Ly, a spokesperson for the group, told *The Epoch Times*: "Parents are just frustrated. ... We've written to the Board of Education, we've written to our superintendent, we've had rallies, we've done all these things. What can we do?"

The parents' concern is justified. According to a report issued on October 1st by Stanford University's Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO), on average, students in 19 states had an estimated loss from 57 to 183 days of learning in reading and from 136 to 232 days of learning in math in the spring of 2020 due to the lockdowns.

Many families are taking things into their own hands. The concept of home-based "pandemic pods," in which parents team up with other families in their neighborhoods to teach their kids, has gone viral, and some are hiring teachers to help with the process. Just last week, Cato Institute scholar Jason Bedrick and EdChoice fellow Matthew Ladner released "Let's Get Small: Microschools, Pandemic Pods, and the Future of Education in America," a report on the

phenomenon. In the summary, they write that COVID-19 has “spurred the dramatic rise of microschoools and ‘pandemic pods’ as school districts’ reopening plans (or lack thereof) drove desperate parents to explore alternative education options. For many microschoooling or podding families, these options are merely temporary, intended to get them through the pandemic. However, given the considerable growth in microschoooling in recent years, there are reasons to believe that the pandemic accelerated a growing trend that could significantly reshape K–12 education in the United States.”

The 74’s Bekah McNeil agrees that we are in the midst of a pandemic homeschooling boom. She writes that many families have discovered that their children need something other than what is offered in public schools, and find success using different curricula than they use. That many parents will continue with homeschooling after the coronavirus has subsided scares the spit out of the education establishment, and the pushback has already begun.

Perhaps the most telling slam on the pods comes to us via *The Boston Globe*. In a thoroughly hysterical rant, Joanna Weiss explains “Why learning pods could be worse for public schools than the pandemic.” Using Harvard education professor Paul Reville as a source, she writes that the pods are a “sign of panic” and that “funding disparities and a persistent achievement gap” will be made worse if well-to-do families choose to homeschool. She adds “...opportunity gaps, differences in children’s access to enrichment and learning, will only get greater. The ultimate danger...is an extreme version of a private, free-market model, in which public schooling as we know it would be the equivalent of what public housing is to housing. The neediest will use it. But anyone with the means will pay for another option.”

“But anyone with the means will pay for another option.” Could Weiss possibly be unaware that people with means have been doing this all along?

The obvious solution to Weiss’ grouching is to provide all parents the ability to have options via vouchers, educational savings accounts, tax-credit scholarships, and other forms of school choice.

In fact, in July, U.S. Senators Tim Scott and Lamar Alexander introduced the School Choice Now Act, “giving public school, private school, and homeschool families the resources they need to ensure their students have access to a quality education in these uncertain times....”

Scholarship-granting organizations would be authorized to use the one-time funding to provide families with direct educational assistance for academic instruction that works best for their child, including private school tuition and home-schooling expenses. Taxpayers would get a dollar-for-dollar federal tax credit for contributions to scholarship-granting organizations. But amazingly all the equity zealots have been mum on this bill, and it’s gone nowhere in Congress.

The COVID-19 pandemic has provided us with what economist Joseph Schumpeter termed “creative destruction,” an “innovation mechanism by which new production units replace outdated ones.” Parents are innovating, but the moribund education establishment and the agenda-driven unions are not going to cede any ground without a fight.

Stay tuned.