



If Many More Private Schools Close, All Schools Will Suffer

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Strange bedfellows on private school choice. From left: Joe Biden, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and Barry Goldwater.

America's private schools are not immune to the dangers posed by Covid-19. In fact, without prompt help from Uncle Sam, they may be among the institutions at greatest risk of succumbing to the virus.

More than 100 private schools have announced that they will be closing their doors permanently, at least in part because of the pandemic. That number is sure to climb as families hard hit by the crisis make enrollment decisions for the fall, as schools face the prospect of reopening below capacity because of safety concerns, and as fears of the coronavirus continue to depress church attendance and therefore the regular contributions from parishioners that help sustain parochial schools.

It is not the well-endowed private schools serving the one percent that face risk. Perhaps that is why the national media has paid so little attention to this crisis. According to the CATO Institute, which is tracking private-school closures nationally, the average annual tuition charged at the schools that have announced that they will close is under \$7,000—less than half of the average per-pupil spending on public schools nationwide.

Widespread private-school closures pose problems not just for the students who attend them, but also for public-school budgets nationwide. Whatever one thinks of using government funds to expand school choice, there is no denying that the nation's 5.7 million students who now attend private schools save money for taxpayers, who otherwise would have to pay to educate these children in public schools. The pro-school-choice American Federation for Children pegs the annual savings to state and local governments at \$75 billion.

Nearly 50 years ago, fears about the budget implications of private-school closures sparked a series of bipartisan efforts in Congress to provide relief for this sector. One such proposal—a tax credit for K–12 and higher-education tuition expenses—even passed the House of Representatives in 1978. The measure's champion in the Senate was Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a Democrat from New York. The heterodox coalition that backed the concept in [a series of votes](#) that August included former Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater of Arizona and Joe Biden, then Delaware's junior senator and a product of Catholic schools.

The 1978 bill ultimately foundered in the Senate, owing in part to doubts about the constitutionality of using federal funds to support families attending religious schools. The U.S.

Supreme Court has long since laid that concern to rest. Its 2002 *Zelman* decision upheld state-funded vouchers for religious private schools, and this term the court even ruled that state constitutions cannot be used to bar religious schools from participating in school-choice programs (see “[In Supreme Court Case, a Far-Reaching Win for Religious-School Parents](#),” *legal beat*).

What’s also changed since the 1970s is the alignment of support for policies to sustain private-school choice. Like so many issues in American politics, this one has polarized sharply along party lines. Yes, current survey data show that school-choice proposals garner high levels of support from Black and Hispanic voters—core Democratic constituencies. Today, however, it is hard to imagine a prominent Democrat like Moynihan leading a charge to provide aid to private schools, even in times of economic distress, or a Democratic backbench senator joining that cause. The fact that the Trump administration has made a federal tax credit to support private-school scholarships its top education priority makes deviations from the party line all the more unlikely.

This political reality doesn’t change the fact that private schools need relief now—and that failing to provide that relief would only aggravate the financial challenges facing *all* schools. As Kirabo Jackson and colleagues demonstrate in this issue (see “[The Costs of Cutting School Spending](#),” *research*), policymakers and advocates have a strong case for a new round of federal aid to support state and local education budgets. Cuts to school spending in the wake of the Great Recession helped cause the first nationwide decline in student test scores in a half-century, as well as a drop in the number of new college students. As the virus continues to spread, the additional expenses schools face in preparing to reopen, whether in person or virtually, only strengthen that case.

Yet private schools face those same expenses, and failing to support them will only heighten the challenges for public schools. A bill introduced on July 22 by Senators Tim Scott and Lamar Alexander would provide a one-time appropriation of funds to state-based organizations that provide private-school scholarships. It would also create a permanent federal tax credit for donations to those organizations. The latter proposal seems like a heavy lift now, given the politics of the issue. But Republicans in the Senate may yet be able to use their leverage to ensure that America’s private schools do not become another vulnerable population left exposed.