

School-opening extortion

August 11th, 2020

But teachers unions seem to think it's also an opportunity — to squeeze more money from taxpayers and put their private and public charter school competition out of business. That's the only way to read the extraordinary effort by national and local union leaders to keep their members from returning to the classroom.

Recently, Randi Weingarten, leader of the powerful American Federation of Teachers, declared support for “safety strikes” if local unions deem insufficient the steps their school districts are taking to mitigate Covid-19. And last week an alliance of teachers unions and progressive groups sponsored what they called a “national day of resistance” around the country listing their demands before returning to the classroom. They include:

- Support for our communities and families, including canceling rents and mortgages, a moratorium on evictions/foreclosures, providing direct cash assistance to those not able to work or who are unemployed, and other critical social needs
- Moratorium on new charter or voucher programs and standardized testing
- Massive infusion of federal money to support the reopening funded by taxing billionaires and Wall Street” The phrase for this is political extortion. Rather than work to open schools safely, the unions are issuing ultimatums and threatening strikes until they are granted their ideological wish list. Children, who would have to endure more lost instruction, are their hostages.

These public unions are also lobbying their political allies to keep public charter and private schools closed. On Friday the chief health officer for Maryland's Montgomery County, Travis Gayles, ordered private schools to remain closed until Oct. 1.

The order came in spite of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention saying that reopening schools with in-person instruction is a step toward improving public health — especially for low-income and minority children. The order was a slap to the many schools that are moving heaven and earth to reopen within the CDC guidelines.

The good news is that Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan overruled the commissioner. In an amended emergency order, he limited the ability of local health officials to impose “blanket closure” mandates, emphasizing that Maryland's plan is built on local flexibility.

He also took a stand for equal opportunity: “Private and parochial schools deserve the same opportunity and flexibility to make reopening decisions based on public health guidelines.” This is a victory for common sense, but it's also too rare.

New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy has said that if public schools are remote-only, private schools must be too. In Milwaukee, private schools planning to reopen were blindsided by a state order

that no schools can do so until the city meets certain benchmarks. In California, Gov. Gavin Newsom has laid out new guidelines that will prevent private and public schools from reopening until the state declares they can.

Public schools are funded whether they open or not. But private and religious schools, which rely on tuition and donations, don't have that luxury. The Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom reckons that 107 private and religious schools have been shut down permanently at least partly due to Covid-19. New York's Catholic archdiocese has announced the closure of 20 schools.

The teachers unions have a cynical interest in forcing their competitors to shut down. What a humiliation it would be if charter and private schools reopen and demonstrate that in-person education can be done with the right risk mitigation. Or if parents unsatisfied with the public schools' response to the coronavirus decide a private school would be better for their child.

If there's a silver lining here, it's that Americans are getting a closer look at the true, self-interested character of today's teachers unions. They are allies of the political left. And they wield monopoly power that they are now using to coerce parents and taxpayers to dance to their agenda if they want their children to learn.

The proper political response should be to give taxpayer dollars to parents to decide where and how to educate their children. If parents want to use the money for private schools that are open, or for new forms of home instruction, they should have that right. No political force should have veto power over the education of America's children.