

Commentary: Private, Catholic and other faith-based schools need help through pandemic too

Dan Lipinski

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As a former teacher, I was proud to support the CARES Act, which provided billions of dollars to help K-12 students across the country in response to COVID-19. But the job is not done. While students are starting a new school year that will require significantly more resources whether education is taking place in person or remotely, Congress is working on another pandemic relief package.

There is general agreement that some level of aid should be provided to help students learn while protecting their health and safety. As we consider how best to provide this support, we should focus on ensuring that all students, including the nearly 6 million who attend private schools, are included.

Like public schools, private schools had to move to remote learning in the spring to slow the spread of the virus. Many of these schools, especially those run by Catholic and other faith-based institutions in cities such as Chicago, serve low-income and minority communities that have been heavily impacted by the coronavirus pandemic. These schools are vital to their communities. Even while students were sent home, they continued to do their best to deliver on their core educational missions while also providing meal services and other essential resources to those in need.

In the COVID-19 relief bill that is being negotiated, we must make sure that we do not leave out the families and neighborhoods that rely on these vital private schools. The best way to do this would be to provide funding to state-certified scholarship granting organizations (SGOs).

These nonprofits already exist in Illinois and many other states to disburse scholarships to eligible students who attend qualified private schools. SGOs are greatly oversubscribed, with thousands of low-income families sitting on waiting lists hoping to get a call that their child will receive a scholarship. By supporting SGOs, Congress can help these families — many of which are now facing the gut-wrenching task of having to take a child out of their school because they can no longer pay tuition.

Emergency funding for SGOs is now on the table in negotiations over the relief bill because Senate Republicans included S. 4284, the School Choice Now Act, in their proposed relief package. This bill, introduced by Sen. Tim Scott, R-S.C., along with Senate Education

Committee Chairman Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn., would provide one-time funding for SGOs to address the current crisis and also create a permanent dollar-for-dollar federal tax credit for contributions to SGOs. Recently I joined Rep. Bradley Byrne, R-Ala., and Rep. Mark Walker, R-N.C., in introducing H.R. 8100, an updated companion bill in the House.

Failure to provide this lifeline will result in more private schools closing, meaning that many children, especially those in low-income families, will move into public schools. This influx of students would mean more overcrowded classrooms at a time when social distancing is critical to health and higher taxes while many families already face financial hardship.

EdChoice predicts that if even 10% of children who attend private schools in Illinois switch to public schools, Illinois taxpayers would need to spend an additional \$353 million annually. The **Cato Institute reports** that more than 110 private schools across the country have already permanently closed because of COVID-19, and these numbers will surely skyrocket as more schools fail to open or get closed down this school year. Each of these school closures also means greater hardships for communities struggling during these tough times. In **“Lost Classroom, Lost Community,”** Notre Dame professors Margaret F. Brinig and Nicole Stelle Garnett found that the loss of Catholic schools in urban communities triggered disorder, crime and an overall decline in community cohesiveness.

As Congress focuses on providing necessary aid for K-12 education in this next COVID-19 relief bill, we must make sure that no families are left out, no matter what type of school their children attend. We cannot afford to fail them and their communities.