



Parents, Not Teachers Unions, Should Dictate School Choices

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COVID-19 K-12 school shutdowns have opened up opportunities for national and local public teachers unions to hold hostage the educations of children subject to meeting demands that have nothing to do with legitimate safety concerns.

Among these, before returning to classrooms they would require government moratoriums on new private charter or voucher programs that enable parents to seek better learning options than are afforded to them in local public schools. Private schools that do open with in-person teachers present an obvious competitive threat to their bargaining leverage.

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 on August 3, an alliance of teachers unions and progressive groups sponsored a "national day of resistance" listing ultimatums for returning their members to classrooms.

Many of the conditions for avoiding the boycott seemingly have nothing to do with protecting either teachers or students from contracting viral infections. They include, for example: a moratorium on standardized testing, government support for communities and families such as cancellations of rents, mortgages, evictions and foreclosures; financial assistance for those who are unemployed or have special social needs; and a "massive infusion of federal money to support the reopening funded by taxing billionaires on Wall Street."

So OK, imagine that those extortion mandates aren't met, while individual schools implement safeguards to comply with Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). After all, even the CDC has said that reopening schools with in-person instruction is a step toward improving public health.

The social and educational costs of keeping children out of the classroom is enormous. The alternative — virtual learning — is especially hard on low-income children who may not have devices or reliable internet service.

Many of these students may also have single or two working parents who can't be home to monitor their progress. Most immediately, school closings are creating a child care crisis that will make it difficult or even impossible for many parents to hold on to jobs in an already pandemic-ravaged labor economy.

Online instruction is a very inadequate substitute for "really" being with classmates and teachers who are totally present for them.

In addition, many parents of children enrolled in hybrid teaching models will have multiple children on different face-to-face attendance schedules that won't enable them to manage their work arrangements around supervising at home or transporting them to classes.

Many parents aren't able to work from home; others lack computing or home-schooling skills.

It's tragically ironic that some states that allow opening of bars and tattoo parlors are banning access to a service to the future of society that is of such great importance.

Although parents and teachers everywhere have understandable concerns about opening classrooms in places where the virus spread is uncontrollable, children also appear less likely than adults to contract the virus, and also less likely to develop symptoms.

Concern for the safety of far most vulnerable older teachers and others with special health problems must clearly be a top priority. This is sadly true for myself and many millions of other seniors that must take special precautions to social distance themselves out of harm's way. I will be exclusively interacting with my graduate students virtually in the fall.

In this regard, COVID-19 is not an equally unfair injustice menace. Teachers unions and their members will need to grasp that reality.

Instead, while threatening to shut down public schools, the unions are lobbying state and local governments to shutter private schools as well. After all, public school teachers will be paid whether they show up or not. The pain will be only temporary, or at least until their coercive demands are met at some uncertain future time when the virus is defeated.

On the other hand, private and religious schools that rely on tuition and donations enjoy no such luxury.

The Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom estimates that at least 107 private and religious schools have been shut down permanently due to COVID-19. New York's Catholic archdiocese has announced the closure of 20 schools.

The Democrat-aligned unions are experiencing obstructive victories.

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.

Teachers unions have a cynical reason to force private competitors to shut down rather than have them demonstrate that in-person education can be accomplished safely with the right risk mitigations. Allowing them to remain open would also demonstrate which school administrations and teachers truly care most about putting the interests of students first.

Parents should be granted responsibility to decide where and how best to educate their children. Shutting down all schools leave many with no good options whatsoever.

