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Shepardson: School choice is the solution to Virginia's mask wars

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Conservatives across America proudly wave the banner of school choice — and for good reason. When done well, both voucher programs and charter schools can empower families to embrace the curricula that work best for their children.

According to Cato Institute analyses, certain iterations of these reforms respectively **improve** student outcomes and provide education that is **more cost-effective** for the taxpayer than traditional public schools.

Similar logic no doubt guided Gov. Glenn Youngkin's **resounding endorsement** of additional charter offerings for Virginia K-12 students. However, if the new Republican administration is serious about following through on the **campaign promise** that “parents matter,” it should note how school choice involves a greater political commitment than simply a few extra budget items.

Families deserve the freedom to choose institutions compatible with their own values and parenting styles, and this right applies equally to Democrats as it does to Republicans.

Or so one would think; Youngkin's sweeping **ban on mask mandates** in K-12 schools, **both public and private**, erroneously suggests otherwise.

Contrary to the language of this executive order, it is clear that parents in Virginia and elsewhere are actually debating whether each school as a *whole*, not any individual student, should take extensive omicron precautions.

Sadly, the partisan winds blowing across the U.S. give public officials from both parties an immense incentive to overlook concerns held by the opposing side.

Perhaps this is why Youngkin apparently failed to consider why some families might prefer — even if incorrectly — a thoroughly masked community.

Nonetheless, there exists a tangible solution to mask polarization that requires neither force nor compromise. It even has a familiar name — school choice!

Families uncomfortable with masking or even vaccinating their kids should be able to choose an institution willing to accommodate those worries. At the same time, any parent who fears the spread of omicron also would benefit from the choice to send their child to a school that treats such anxieties as legitimate.

Of course, the governor and his Department of Education do possess ample leeway to dictate public school policies. Elections have consequences in this regard. That being said, Youngkin has overstepped his authority in encroaching on the private sector, where property rights and freedom of association must allow schools to determine their own rules — and accept the financial consequences for either serving or failing to serve a need in their communities.

Provided the government minds its own business, private schools offer the key to resolving the left-right COVID divide while amplifying parents' freedoms.

For instance, an expansive voucher program covering tuition for most families would ensure equal opportunity to personally control which public health measures their children experience. Virginia in particular has a unique capacity to go all-in on vouchers, given that the state already oversees a (tragically anemic) private school scholarship program. To this end, Education Improvement Scholarships are currently used by a **meager** 0.3% of students, and yet, they seem to offer a starting foundation upon which ambitious reformers could build a monumental investment in educational freedom.

After all, parents matter, right?

Those of us who spend time in conservative-leaning circles know well that social pressures to mock and denigrate extremes on the left fuel some overly broad and vindictive generalizations.

The culture war raging around education policy is among the worst of these traps, as it neglects the most American counterargument to the nanny state: live and let live.

Republicans should take inspiration from this mantra, and trust that market forces can sort out cultural battles over what level of COVID restrictions represents the parents' and the people's will.