



## **A post-COVID agenda for Minnesota's state government: Education**

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COVID-19 has laid bare the educational disparities that continue to remain a stubborn feature of our education system. The status quo, one-size-fits-all does not fit all, and if we do not use this opportunity to focus on students instead of systems, existing achievement gaps and learning loss will continue to be exacerbated.

In an article titled, "[Decentralize K-12 Education](#)," which is part of a larger collection of essays the Cato Institute has recently published, Corey DeAngelis and Neal McCluskey offer several suggestions for state policymakers to consider that would help address persistent education shortcomings and move our education system in a better direction. (My colleague John Phelan wrote about Cato's recommendations for the economy [here](#).)

*State policymakers should*

- *enact universal education savings accounts;*
- *allow any students who so desire to enroll in virtual charter schools up to a school's capacity to serve them, and allow their public education dollars to follow them to such schools; and*
- *let schools and districts determine whether students are receiving sufficient education rather than prescribing such measures as "seat time" for all schools.*

The Center has written about these ideas in various forms, which are highlighted below.

### **EDUCATION SAVINGS ACCOUNTS**

In their simplest form, Education Savings Accounts (ESAs) are accounts the government offers eligible families to help pay for education-related products and services. The government already sets aside tax dollars for every child's education, but in an ESA, the money is able to follow the child. Different than private school vouchers and other scholarships, ESAs help families choose multiple learning options simultaneously. It gives parents the ability to customize their child's education according to that child's needs.

Given the budget challenges districts face, and COVID-19 related concerns families may have regarding their child's learning, ESAs would be a [targeted solution](#) to address these issues and ensure students can continue learning safely.

In Minnesota, state leaders could allocate a portion of CARES Act/GEER funds to students and families in the form of a Special Education ESA. This would be a specific type of ESA to serve

students with special needs during a time when access to services may be limited. As a recent Kare 11 investigation discovered, some of Minnesota's most vulnerable students aren't getting the help they need to learn during the epidemic. Students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), which by law schools are required to uphold, aren't having their IEPs met. With an ESA, parents could access the tutors, specialized therapists or other service-related needs that a district bound to distance learning can't provide. Because special education is often a big expense for districts, instructional assistance from a Special Education ESA could help alleviate some of that cost.

Mississippi has offered something similar for years. The state enacted the Equal Opportunity for Students with Special Needs Program in 2015, which is an education savings account program that allows Mississippi students with special needs to receive a portion of their public funding in a government-authorized savings account with multiple uses.

Other states have also taken recent action to allocate GEER funds to students and families to help them finance the learning option(s) that will meet their child's needs.

Without exception, ESA funding per student is less than the state's average per student funding. This saves taxpayers money while helping students access learning opportunities that they previously weren't able to.

## **VIRTUAL CHARTER SCHOOLS**

Unlike distance learning models that brick-and-mortar school districts have implemented, virtual schools specialize in online learning. They have curriculum designed and teachers trained to provide services and engage students from a distance. By opening the doors wide to virtual charter schools, we could introduce more flexibility and innovation into our education system.

## **EDUCATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS**

Given the unprecedented school year we find ourselves in, educational effectiveness should not be measured by the time a student sits in a building or views recorded lessons. This is why, even during a pandemic, assessments matter even if it's challenging to administer them. Students were behind pre-COVID and have experienced and could experience more learning loss moving forward. In order to help get students back on track academically, or get them the extra help they may need, we need to check on their learning and have a type of accountability in place to guard against lowered expectations.

While cancelling last year's state tests was necessary, Minnesota should not opt-out of testing this year. Another year of cancelled state tests would leave us less informed about where our students are at and would only compound the educational disparities in our education system.