

# Tennessean.

## Tennessee should fund public school students instead of institutions

**More and more families are starting to realize they're getting a bad deal and support for school choice is growing.**

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Millions of U.S. children have been out of school and in front of a computer screen for over half a year because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although recent data from school reopenings around the world suggest that schools are not significant drivers of community transmission, teachers unions in Tennessee and across the nation have pushed to keep schools closed for in-person instruction.

Unions in many states have largely succeeded in keeping classrooms closed. All three studies on the subject find that public school reopening decisions are strongly linked to union power and politics rather than community needs.

The latest data reported by Education Week in September revealed that less than half of the public school districts in Tennessee planned to reopen with full-time in-person instruction available to all students. And several Tennessee school districts announced closures ahead of Thanksgiving break.

To be clear, this does not mean teachers unions have bad intentions. They understand that they can keep their benefits and pay about the same while reducing health risk, costs associated with providing in-person childcare services, and commuting to work. Unions are simply rationally responding to the incentives that are baked into the K-12 education system.

### **COVID-19 has exposed problems that already existed**

The main problem is that public schools have a monopoly in the education market. Families are essentially powerless when it comes to K-12 education because they cannot take their children's taxpayer-funded education dollars elsewhere when public schools fail to meet their needs. The COVID-19 pandemic has shined a spotlight on this power imbalance. Public schools aren't even opening their doors in many places, yet they're still getting to keep students' education funding, even if that student chose to attend a different school that fall.

Meanwhile families are struggling with remote learning that is proving disastrous for some students and others are scrambling to figure out how to cover the costs of in-person learning alternatives such as homeschooling and pandemic pods. More and more families are starting to realize they're getting a bad deal. The latest national survey on the subject found that support for school choice surged by 10 percentage points between April and August – from 67% to 77%. And a 2019 survey of registered Tennessee voters similarly found that 78% of respondents supported the concept of school choice.

Let me be clear: the Coronavirus pandemic didn't break the public school system. It simply exposed the problems that already existed.

### **Higher funding of schools does not translate to better performance**

The 2019 Nation's Report Card shows that only 31% of Tennessean 8th graders are proficient in math and reading. Tennessee's statewide assessments tell a similar story. The latest data indicate that only 36% of public school students performed at or above grade level on the state's math and reading assessments.

Data from the Tennessee Department of Education also indicate that higher levels of public school expenditures per student are not positively associated with higher performance on academic achievement even after controlling for differences in students. Simply pouring more money into a broken education system is unlikely to fix it without meaningful incentives to spend that money wisely.

In fact, Kennesaw State University's Ben Scafidi found that Tennessee increased inflation-adjusted K-12 public education spending per student by 41% between 1992 and 2014. Real teacher salaries in Tennessee dropped by 2% over the same period. More of those dollars might make it into the classroom if public schools had real incentives to cater to the needs of families.

### **Why empowering families is a better approach**

My recently released study, published by the Political Economy Research Institute at Middle Tennessee State University, finds that empowering families to choose the school that works best for their children could lead to substantial economic benefits. For example, doubling the number of students accessing public charter schools is expected to produce an additional \$1.2 billion in higher lifetime earnings associated with higher academic achievement. Similarly, expanding access to the state's private school choice pilot program is expected to produce an additional \$102 million in economic benefits associated with increasing high school graduation rates.

The preponderance of the evidence also suggests that allowing children's education funding to follow them to the school of their families' choosing improve nonacademic outcomes as well. For example, the most rigorous systematic reviews find that school choice generally leads to higher levels of satisfaction, safety, and civic outcomes. And 26 of 28 studies on the topic find that private school choice competition generally leads to better results in public schools. School choice is a rising tide that lifts all boats.

The evidence happens to be in favor educational freedom. But that shouldn't be surprise anyone. Private and charter schools are directly accountable to families. These schools understand that families can walk if they don't deliver.

The solution to the failure of the public school system to meet the needs of families is simple: we should fund students instead of institutions. We already do this in higher education with Pell Grants and the GI Bill. Funding for these federal programs goes to individual students who can then take that money to the public or private university of their choosing. The same goes for some state-funded pre-K programs as well as food stamps. We don't force low-income families to use their food stamp dollars at residentially assigned government-run grocery stores. Instead we fund the families directly and allow them to choose the provider that best meets their needs.

K-12 education should catch up and fund students instead of systems.

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