



How Pennsylvania is discouraging education during the coronavirus crisis

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Closing brick-and-mortar schools was a smart decision to flatten the curve in Pennsylvania. However, the state government has made decisions since then that will discourage continuity of education during the current crisis. Here's how:

Gov. Wolf ordered all public and private schools to close, including cyber charter schools serving more than 37,000 children in the state virtually. This kind of blanket order does nothing to encourage schools to provide educational services to students online during the emergency.

Although it is still technically possible for cyber charter schools to enroll new students and provide educational services virtually during the mandated closure, the legislature just passed a bill that would actually discourage these schools from helping kids in this time of need. This at a time when Pennsylvania's school districts were woefully unprepared to provide remote instruction for their students, unlike in many other states.

As a response to the unanticipated closures, the bill shortens the school year and ensures that school employees still get paid the same amount. Those things sound reasonable.

However, the bill forbids all public charter schools that are closed from counting new students on their official enrollment numbers starting on March 13, the day of the governor's announcement to close all schools. Because all schools are officially "closed" on paper, this part of the legislation applies to all public charter schools whether they are providing educational services virtually or not.

In practice, this means that although families are technically allowed to enroll their children in cyber charter schools at this time, the charter schools will not be paid for their services. And because the cyber charter schools would have to take on additional costs associated with educating the new students, the legislation financially harms cyber charter schools for accepting these students and doing the right thing.

That's the opposite of what the state should be doing if it wants to encourage schools to help its most vulnerable families and their children right now.

The legislation is also discriminatory because it only applies the March 13 enrollment rule to public charter schools, not district-run public schools. In other words, school districts will be compensated for serving new students during the crisis virtually, but public charter schools will not.

Put differently, if a family moves from New Jersey to Pennsylvania and enrolls their child in a district-run public school today, that school will rightly be compensated for serving that child. But the bill does not allow the state to pay for that same child to be educated in a cyber charter school.

Noticing the appeal of cyber charter schools at this time, the Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators recently pushed to block families from switching to these virtual schools altogether. Just last week, this association lobbied the Pennsylvania Department of Education to ban all cyber charter school enrollments during the closure.

Imagine if dine-in-only restaurants lobbied to close down all restaurants offering carryout services. That would help protect dine-in-only restaurants from competition. But that move would be shamefully opportunistic and obviously wouldn't help families in need. Yet, that is essentially what the school administrators' association wanted for the state's education system.

The legislature rushed a bill that financially punishes charter schools for serving additional children virtually during the pandemic. The urgency is understandable, but Gov. Wolf could still fix this problem by allowing public charter schools that are providing educational services virtually to officially open. That would reward cyber charter schools for doing the right thing and serving the families who need them the most right now. Hopefully the governor does the right thing, too.

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