



## Teachers unions' nonsensical fight against school choice hurts students, families

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Nearly two years after the initial school closures in March 2020, some districts still refuse to open their doors for business. Detroit public schools will not reopen until at least Monday. Flint public schools are now indefinitely closed for in-person learning.

These closures are inexcusable. Data has consistently shown that children's mortality risk from COVID-19 is remarkably low, and that schools are some of the safest places in the community. Meanwhile, prolonged school closures have hurt children academically, mentally and physically.

A National Bureau of Economic Research working paper found that math learning loss was "10.1 percentage points smaller for districts fully in-person" than remote districts last school year. A Michigan State University report similarly found that Michigan school "districts that offered only remote instruction throughout the 2020-21 school year experienced a reduction in math achievement growth that was twice as large as that for in-person districts."

A September 2021 study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association found that school closures compromised children's mental health, "with disproportionate mental health consequences for older and Black and Hispanic children as well as children from families with lower income." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data indicate that emergency department visits for suspected adolescent suicide attempts surged 31% in 2020. Last month, Harvard professor Joseph G. Allen argued that more school closures could exacerbate "a full-on child mental health crisis."

"Two weeks to slow the spread" has turned into two years to flatten a generation.

Private schools, day cares and other businesses fought to reopen from the get-go. In fact, Michigan private schools won a lawsuit against Gov. Gretchen Whitmer after she ordered all high schools to close in 2020. But many public school teachers unions fought to remain closed. In fact, at least five studies have found that public school districts in areas with stronger teachers unions were significantly less likely to reopen in person in 2020.

Follow the science? More like follow the *political* science.

The main problem is one of incentives. One of these sectors receives children's education dollars regardless of whether they open their doors for business. But it's even worse than that. The government school monopoly financially benefits from failure. Teachers unions can hold

children's education hostage to secure hefty ransom payments from taxpayers. In fact, Detroit public schools received nearly \$1.3 billion in COVID "relief" since March 2020.

Enough is enough. Detroit public schools are slated to spend over \$26,000 per student this school year. For context, Michigan's average private school tuition is roughly a quarter of that amount, or about \$7,233 per student in 2022. That money should go directly to families so they can find alternatives.

We already fund students directly when it comes to Pell Grants and the GI Bill for higher education. With each of these programs, the funding follows the student to the public or private, religious or non-religious, higher education provider of their choosing. The same goes for taxpayer-funded pre-K programs such as Head Start. We already fund individuals directly when it comes to other taxpayer-funded initiatives such as food stamps and Medicaid.

We don't force low-income families to spend their food stamp dollars at residentially assigned government-run grocery stores. Instead, families are allowed to choose to take the funding to Walmart, Trader Joe's, Kroger or just about any other provider of groceries. We should apply the same logic to K-12 education and fund students, not systems.

What's interesting is that many of the same people who support funding students directly when it comes to higher education and pre-K oppose it during the in-between years of K-12 education.

There's only one way to explain that apparent logical inconsistency. There's a difference in power dynamics. Choice is the norm with higher education, pre-K and just about any other industry. But choice threatens an entrenched special interest when it comes to K-12 education. And that special interest fights as hard as possible to keep children's education dollars regardless of whether they meet the needs of families.

The unions' main argument to protect their monopoly is that school choice "defunds" public schools. But the money doesn't belong to the public schools in the first place. Education funding is meant for educating children, not for propping up and protecting a particular institution.

If anything, public schools defund families. School choice initiatives just return the money to the hands of the intended beneficiaries of the funding — the children and their families. Pell Grants similarly do not "defund" community colleges just because students can choose to take the money to private universities. Allowing families to choose their grocery store doesn't "defund" Kroger.

Allowing families to choose their school doesn't "defund" public schools.

And why would giving families a choice "defund" public schools, anyway? The monopoly's main argument against school choice is an admission of failure. They understand that many families aren't happy with the services they're receiving. That's a great argument for giving parents a choice, not for trapping low-income children in institutions that are failing them for 13 years without exit options.

The most advantaged families already have school choice. They are more likely to have the resources to live in neighborhoods assigned to the best "public" schools and to pay out-of-pocket for private school tuition and fees. Funding students directly would allow more families to access educational opportunities. School choice is an equalizer.

Another problem with that argument is that public schools financially benefit when they lose students to school choice competition. Public schools are only partially funded based on enrollment counts, meaning they can keep substantial amounts of funding for students who leave to private schools. Imagine if Kroger were able to keep large portions of your grocery funding each week even after your family started shopping at Trader Joe's.

Public schools also up their game in response to competition. Twenty-five of 27 studies and the latest peer-reviewed meta-analysis on the topic find that private school choice competition improves outcomes in public schools. Funding students directly does not “destroy” public schools. It makes them better. School choice is a rising tide that lifts all boats.

Families are finally figuring out that there isn't any good reason to fund bureaucratic institutions when we can fund students and empower families instead. Nationwide polling by RealClear Opinion Research found a 10 point surge in support for school choice, from 64% in April 2020 to 74% in June 2021. The latest polling conducted by Marketing Resource Group found that 75% of Michigan residents support school choice. Nineteen states enacted or expanded programs to fund students instead of systems in 2021.

The Michigan Legislature passed two school choice proposals just a few months ago. But Whitmer sided with the teachers union monopoly at the expense of students and vetoed both proposals in November.

The good news is that families can still fight back. Michigan voters can help override Whitmer's anti-parent vetoes by signing the Let Kids Learn petition.

I'm optimistic about the future of parental rights in education. Many parents felt powerless when it came to their children's education over the past two years — and they are going to fight to make sure they never feel powerless like that ever again. The teachers unions have overplayed their hand and awakened a sleeping giant: parents.

Parents care about their kids more than anyone else. They're now watching education issues very closely, and they aren't going away any time soon. Politicians from all parties would be wise to listen to them going forward.

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