



## Don't Force Schools to Reopen, but Don't Force Families To Pay for Closed Schools Either

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School closures have affected at least 55 million K-12 students in the U.S. since March. As we march closer to the fall, a debate about reopening brick-and-mortar schools is heating up. President Donald Trump and others are pressuring all schools to reopen in the fall. Teachers unions and other groups are saying that schools should stay closed unless we pour over 100 billion new federal dollars into the system. Both sides are missing the mark.

Those calling to reopen schools have legitimate concerns. Millions of American families have structured their employment and living situations around the school calendar. Keeping schools closed would create disproportionate economic hardships for single-parent households and two-parent households that rely on two incomes.

Some school districts, such as Fairfax County Public Schools, have offered families the choice to send their children to brick-and-mortar schools for 2 days a week or 0 days a week. New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio recently announced that most students will only attend in-person classes 2 or 3 days a week. But those kinds of options do little to help parents return to work full-time.

That's not the only problem. New national data suggest that most government school districts failed to provide meaningful education remotely. A June 2020 report by the Center for Reinventing Public Education found that only 1 in the 3 school districts required teachers to deliver instruction during the lockdown. Recent data suggest students have already lost ground academically because of these kinds of systemic failures.

Between the complete closures of some schools and the poor performance of schools that have implemented distance learning, taxpayers are paying a lot of money for inadequate education for their children. Nor was the status quo before COVID-19 anything to celebrate. The U.S. has increased inflation-adjusted per-student spending by 280 percent since 1960, and we currently spend over \$15,000 per child each year. Meanwhile, the Nation's Report Card shows that only 15 percent of U.S. students are proficient in U.S. history and 2 out of every 3 students are not proficient in reading.

Reasonable people can argue about whether we are getting an acceptable return on investment. But why should anyone have to continue paying the same amount for schools that aren't even open?

The American Federation of Teachers claims that government-run schools across the country need over \$116 billion to reopen safely. That's an enormous amount of money. It's about twice the total amount the federal government allocated towards K-12 education in the most recent school year. It's also close to the amount the U.S. dedicated to the Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe after World War II. What's more, the federal CARES act has already provided over \$13 billion to assist in reopening schools. Only 1.5 percent of that money has actually been used by states. Where is all of the money going?

The debate thus far hasn't taken the preferences of families—the customers who are actually paying for all this education—into consideration.

Many families are reporting that they want virtual learning for their children next year. A new national study found that 53 percent of Latino families are considering not enrolling their children in school this year. A June Gallup survey similarly found that 44 percent of families want full- or part-time distance learning this fall. And a recent *USA Today* poll found that 60 percent of parents are "likely" to pursue home-based education this fall.

Already, teachers unions have made it hard for parents to enroll their kids in quality distance learning programs. The teachers union in Oregon successfully lobbied to prevent families from enrolling in virtual charter schools. The Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators similarly lobbied to prevent families from accessing virtual charter school options in the spring. More recently, the California legislature just passed a bill that prevents education dollars from following students to virtual charter schools this school year. And it's not like they're demanding to do the teaching themselves. The Los Angeles teachers union struck a deal with their district that prevented teachers from being required to work more than 4 hours each day during the lockdown. None of these efforts make any sense unless the purpose is to protect a monopoly from competition.

Families obviously need more options right now. But, at the same time, top-down mandates to reopen all schools are not the optimal solution. Reopening requirements likely differ by region and individuals on the ground have the best information needed to make good decisions about their own communities. And if public schools can't reopen, or aren't equipped to provide adequate education online, families shouldn't be forced to pay for them. Think of it this way: If a Walmart doesn't reopen, families can take their food stamps elsewhere. If a school doesn't reopen, families should similarly be able to take their education dollars elsewhere.

If the federal government is to provide any additional stimulus funding for K-12 education, a significant portion of that money should go directly to families, an idea just proposed by U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos. Families could use those dollars to offset the costs of home-based education or to cover private school tuition and fees. However, as Dr. Lindsey Burke has proposed, states could also implement this kind of student-centered solution without unnecessarily involving the federal government.

Putting power into the hands of families would give schools incentives to provide their children with a good education. In fact, a national survey by Common Sense Media found that students in private schools were over twice as likely as students in government schools to connect with their teacher each day during lockdown. This is probably because private school leaders know that they will lose their customers—and their funding—if they don't meet their needs. Schools that

provide shoddy remote learning, do not provide flexible scheduling arrangements, or do not sufficiently address student safety will lose students and their funding.

That's how the education system should work. We should fund students instead of systems. The power should always be in the hands of families instead of bureaucrats. Proponents of educational freedom have always known this. But the powerlessness of families and their children caught up in pandemic politics makes it clearer now more than ever before.

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