



Teachers Unions Must Never Be Allowed To Ban Kids From An Education Again

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I don't blame schools for closing in March. Very little was known about COVID-19 then, so closures seemed the safest decision amid the uncertainty.

Neither do I blame schools for a meager showing that semester. My own district threw together online curricula and instructional materials practically overnight. The results were dismal, but it's the best many could have done given the situation.

However, we've now had nine months to understand this virus, and all the evidence favors returning to in-person instruction. Studies have found that schools are not in fact the "super spreaders" many feared. Dr. Anthony Fauci himself has said to "close the bars and keep the schools open."

Perhaps some schools in hot-spots ought to close, but they should do so for genuine safety concerns, not fear of consequences at the next election. Citing the social, emotional, and academic benefits of in-person learning, The American Association of Pediatrics "strongly advocates" for open schools everywhere possible.

Nonetheless, the majority of our nation's children have spent the last nine months staring at a computer screen at home, clicking through homework links or simply opting to not show up. One institution bears significant guilt for this state of affairs: teacher's unions.

Cato Institute researcher Corey DeAngelis crunched the numbers and confirmed what many suspected: school closures had more to do with union power than pandemic concerns. When he reviewed the decisions that various districts and schools made to open or close, he found that the data correlated more closely with the strength of policies favorable to unions than to case counts and deaths.

The politics get more ludicrous. Unions have protested when school officials set open dates. While discussing school openings, the Los Angeles teachers union also demanded a wealth tax and Medicare for All. A number of unions banded together with the Socialists of America on a resolution to “demand safe schools,” only to eschew discussions of safe openings to instead decry charter schools and suggest cancellation of rent.

At the end of last semester, I decided to change districts to one that would open. Some of my students have had to quarantine. However, with masks, social distancing, and hand sanitizer, we’ve had no local spread; we’ve traced our positive cases to external exposures. We’ve had no disastrous outbreak.

Rather, we have spent our year so far discussing books, playing vocabulary games, running football plays at recess, learning subjects and predicates, decorating my room with Christmas lights, and doing everything a school ought to do: promoting socialization, academic development, and mental health.

As an adult, I got to choose an open school. Union politics have now barred millions of families from a similar privilege.

The academic losses are severe. In June, The New York Times reported months’ worth of learning losses because of school closures. Fewer than half of students showed up during that first semester online. While attendance has improved the learning loss continues, especially among poor and minority students.

After a critical response, the Chicago Teachers Union deleted a tweet insinuating that the push to open schools comes from “racism, sexism, and misogyny.” Considering who these learning losses affect most, it’s quite the opposite.

If enrollment numbers are any determinant of public opinion, then school openings appear wildly popular. The superintendent of Boston Catholic Schools reported an increase of 4,000 students after they made their announcement to open. Other districts have seen similar trends. Families are voting with their feet, many opting out of public education for any in-person schooling available.

If nothing else, this situation is a clear example of both union power and their disregard for student concerns. Families, teachers, and taxpayers cannot truly influence school decisions when union members have the power to strike, undue influence in local elections, and the purse of their national affiliates.

The American Federation of Teachers gave more in political donations than the boogie-man Koch Industries did in 2020. Teachers unions have long been a dominant force in local and national politics, both in funding and manpower.

While the worst of the pandemic closures seem nigh over, there's a clear policy moving forward that can protect students from similar sways of union fickleness: school choice. Zipcodes locked students into closed schools during the pandemic, and only those with means could look elsewhere.

A few others chose "pandemic pods" but even that forces the opportunity cost of staying home from a job. They should have had the freedom to look elsewhere without legal consequences, but our current laws kept them from doing so.

It's time to continue legislative victories that weaken the sway of government unions over American education. The Supreme Court decision *Janus v. AFSCME* ensured that no public school teachers need to pay union dues if they do not want to. Local laws in many states increased austerity measures to ensure they don't follow Detroit's lead and bankrupt themselves from over-promised, union-bargained pensions. School choice would similarly allow any family to select a school that is less beholden to union pressure.

Unions do not care for students. The pandemic has made this abundantly clear. They've lost prestige in many people's minds from this. It's right that they continue to lose political power too.