



## Education choice can prevent fights over covid policies

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February 2, 2022

“One size doesn’t fit all when it comes to education.” This is a phrase that education-choice advocates have voiced for years to explain why families need options. But it’s never been truer than today while dealing with covid-19.

Before Christmas break, many Pennsylvania school districts had considered moving to remote instruction due to concerns about the Omicron variant. Some teachers — especially in Philadelphia — called for returning to remote instruction following the holidays.

A large spike in school closures occurred nationwide in early January, according to [Burbio’s K-12 School Opening Tracker](#). In Pennsylvania, however, most districts have continued to operate in-person. Still, schools throughout the state have closed at least some days this month, with the largest cluster in Greater Philadelphia.

Some families felt a sense of relief when their schools announced closures and a transition to remote instruction. This was especially true for households with higher-risk family members. For example, one mother, who was scheduled to have breast cancer surgery, expressed her concern to the [New York Times](#) that her procedure would be delayed if she contracted covid. Others, meanwhile, fear their children getting covid despite the low statistical risk of severe infection. Regardless of their reasons, these parents should be free to choose a remote learning option for their children.

But many families have the opposite reaction: they want schools to remain open for in-person instruction. Again, the reasons are varied. Some have jobs that can’t be done from home and have no child-care options when a school closes. Others saw how poorly their children fared during previous remote phases. Many recognize, moreover, that kids are already at lower risk for covid and — with vaccines available to teachers and most students — they believe that in-person education should be prioritized.

Such parental preferences should also be respected. They certainly aren’t fringe views. According to [polling](#) conducted by EdChoice in December — just as the omicron variant was becoming widespread — support for in-person education remained high among both parents and teachers. Approximately three-fourths indicated they were very or somewhat comfortable

returning to in-person schooling. Only about 20% indicated they were very or somewhat uncomfortable returning to in-person instruction.

Indeed, there's growing evidence that children have suffered immensely from school closures. Last summer, NWEA, a research group that develops pre-K-12 assessments, released a report on math and reading achievement in the 2020-2021 school year. While some gains were made, they were lower than in typical years — especially in math. Results were particularly low for minority students and students in high-poverty schools.

A November report from Curriculum Associates found similar results. The majority of students suffered academic setbacks, and some are faring worse than others. Students who were already behind academically, minority students, and children in lower-income communities had the most “unfinished learning,” as the report calls it.

With most parents and teachers expressing support for in-person education — in addition to well-documented harms from remote instruction — it's no wonder the consensus is growing that schools should remain open. Even President Joe Biden said as much earlier this month.

But again, no parent should be forced to send their children to an environment they view as unsafe. Education choice, therefore, is the solution.

We don't need to have “all open” or “all closed” battles. With choice, parents can select the environment they're comfortable with. And teachers can teach in the setting they prefer.

Efforts are underway in the Pennsylvania Legislature to give parents more options, especially in light of covid concerns. State Sen. Ryan Aument, R-Lancaster, for instance, recently introduced Senate Bill 1015, which would create the Pandemic Education Savings Account Grant Program. The program would provide \$7,000 educational grants to low-income families who disagree with their districts' covid policies — whether they find them too strict or too loose. The funds could be used for approved purchases, such as tuition, curriculum, tutoring and services for students with special needs.

The pandemic didn't cause the problems in our school system; it merely shone a light on them. A winner-takes-all system that imposes one solution on everyone will never provide for the diverse needs of children. That's why — in or out of a pandemic — families need education choice.

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