



School Choice Will Help Us Respond To Coronavirus

Neal McCluskey

April 3, 2020

I do not have any expertise in COVID-19. From what I can tell, I am reflective of the vast majority of people, and hence we are all facing a time of significant uncertainty.

What I do know is that in the face of uncertainty it is good to have diverse options. Just as you want a diversified portfolio of investments because you will be ruined if you put all of your money in one thing and it tanks, when you are not sure what will work you want several possible solutions to exist.

The good news for American education is that it is decentralized, and diverse options exist.

Within public schooling, local control means that districts can respond to their unique local situations. Schools all over the Seattle area can close while Albuquerque's stay open, and schools can try lots of measures short of lengthy closure to mitigate the coronavirus threat. Of course, local districts face a lot of state and federal mandates, especially about annual testing and related accountability mechanisms, and how those will be handled is stickier.

Perhaps more important than decentralization of government schools is that our charter, private, and homeschooling sectors—and even some traditional districts—have been able to be incubators of sometimes very different ways of delivering education. We may well need to tap into these new mechanisms at greater scale if brick-and-mortar schooling is substantially disrupted. This will certainly mean more schooling occurring in homes, perhaps controlled entirely by parents. It will very likely mean more online content delivery as traditional public schools try to quickly transition from in-person to electronic teaching. The latter will not be easy, but thanks to our having embraced at least modest diversity in education there are already online models operating at scale to provide some blueprint.

For some families, a major disruption may even mean discovering the possibility of “unschooling” — letting kids largely steer their own educational paths, with parents only assisting and facilitating. There is experience with that to draw on, too. Indeed, Cato adjunct scholar Kerry McDonald has been especially prominent in disseminating information about unschooling, and she co-founded a website where you can find lots of unschooling options.

COVID-19 is uncharted territory, and nothing will make it painless to cope with. But at least in education, local autonomy, and having allowed many models to proliferate, lays some good groundwork to respond.

Neal McCluskey, director of the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom