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## In a divided country, one-size-fits-all schools deepen our fissures

For good reason, support for school choice has soared during the pandemic.

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Within hours of being sworn in as Virginia's new governor on Jan. 15, Glenn Youngkin issued an executive order empowering parents to decide whether their children should wear masks in school. That effectively made masking optional for students across the state, triggering a backlash from education officials who support mask mandates. Seven school boards quickly filed lawsuits to block Youngkin's order. "We will fight it to the end," vowed a defiant Jason Kamras, the superintendent of schools in Richmond.

In justice to Youngkin, he was elected on a platform of strong support for parental rights in education and opposition to COVID-19 mandates. And his executive order lays out a reasonable case for not obligating schoolchildren to wear masks. It notes that the health benefits of masking children are "inconsistent," but that the costs — such as delays in language development, difficulty breathing, and increased feelings of isolation — can be significant. "While the Center for Disease Control recommends masks," the order states, "its research has found no statistically significant link between mandatory masking for students and reduced transmission of COVID-19."

In justice to Youngkin's critics, on the other hand, a solid majority of Virginians support mask mandates in schools. A Washington Post poll in September found that 69 percent of voters statewide approved of a statewide mask mandate within school buildings. A survey conducted by Virginia Commonwealth University yielded similar results: 71 percent of Virginia residents agreed that masks should be mandatory in K-12 schools.

On the merits, I sympathize with those who don't want children forced to wear masks. Youngkin is right: The claim that schools with unmasked kids are at greater risk rests on shaky evidence. On the other hand, why should a policy favored by a large majority of parents in a given school or district be overridden by a governor's edict? Youngkin claims that his order "bans neither the wearing of masks nor the issuing of mask mandates" — it simply lets parents decide. But that's disingenuous. A mandate is futile if it's unenforceable. And making masks optional is no option at all for those who fear an outbreak unless masking is universal.

This is not, however, a column about masks. It's a column about minimizing disputes by maximizing choice.

What is true of mask mandates in Virginia is true of a wide variety of school policies in every state: Parents disagree, often profoundly. They come down on different sides of important issues, and in a one-size-fits-all school system there is no way to accommodate them all. Only when there is school choice can incompatible priorities coexist.

Should classroom lessons advance an “anti-racist” agenda focused on the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow, or should they emphasize the ideal of colorblindness and judging individuals by the content of their character? Is it more important to expose students to classic literary works of the Western canon or to lesser-known works by female, nonwhite, or LGBT authors? Should the K-12 curriculum include — or shun — prayer and religious instruction? What should kids in school be taught about sex? About gender identity? About abortion, guns, immigration, American history? Should teachers be union members? Should everyone wear masks?

Reasonable people can hold very different views on such matters, most of which are zero-sum policy questions that cannot be resolved through compromise. Whatever course of action is adopted is apt to greatly please some parents and deeply distress others. When kids' education is at stake, passions often boil over. There have recently been numerous scenes of angry parents venting their outrage during school board meetings. But such protests aren't new.

“Throughout American history,” the Cato Institute's Neal McCluskey has observed, “public schooling has produced political disputes, animosity, and sometimes even bloodshed between diverse people. Such clashes are inevitable in government-run schooling because all Americans are required to support the public schools, but only those with the most political power control them.”

Discussions of school choice commonly focus on achieving better educational outcomes for children in underperforming public schools or from economically deprived families. By now there are scores of empirical studies documenting such gains. A statistical survey published last year by the University of Arkansas concluded that “expanding parental options in education . . . is consistent with improvements in average student performance for US states.” And those improvements aren't limited to the students whose parents take advantage of school-choice options to move them out of traditional public schools. Researchers have repeatedly found that when families have the option of using vouchers or educational savings accounts to pay for non-governmental schooling, public schools tend to improve.

But robust school choice programs do more than boost grades and test scores. They also have the power to lessen hostility and keep communities from fighting over what gets taught and how schools should be run. One-size-fits-all is sometimes inevitable — everyone has to drive on the same side of the street — but it's a poor template for education in a society committed to freedom. Far better is a system of schooling premised on pluralism, freedom, and respect for the rights of parents to make choices for their kids. No elected official decides what clothing children should wear, what religious beliefs they should be taught, or what pediatrician they

should go to. In matters great and small, society trusts parents to exercise good judgment. Only when it comes to education is the government presumed to know what's best.

Things may be changing. The COVID-19 pandemic sharply increased discontent with public schools. Support for school choice has soared. “How have your opinions on homeschooling changed as a result of the coronavirus?” asked a Morning Consult poll last month. Fully 68 percent of respondents said they were more favorable to homeschooling now than they were before the pandemic. Support was high as well for publicly funded school vouchers (supported by 77 percent of school parents), education savings accounts (81 percent), and charter schools (68 percent). Nationwide, school choice programs were created or expanded in 22 states and the District of Columbia last year.

At a time when so many trends in American life have been bleak, this embrace of school choice is something to cheer. The more liberty parents have to choose how, where, and what their children learn, the more tolerant and peaceful America's educational landscape will become. If anyone should know that, it is Virginia's new governor, who campaigned on a platform of respect for parents. He could have ordered simply that each school be free to adopt the mask policy it thought best — and that mothers and fathers be free in turn to choose the school they thought best. Less coercion and more liberty: That's the formula for keeping the peace.