



Affluent Parents Are Pulling Their Kids Out Of Public Schools

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This summer, Amy Blackburn had a choice. She and her husband could keep their 6-year-old daughter in public school and take a hit to their careers, or they could put her in private school, shell out thousands of dollars and be able to do their work.

Her daughter's public school was using a hybrid schedule, where kids went in person part-time. The nearby private school allowed kids to attend five days a week. Blackburn and her husband decided the cost was worth it. If her daughter couldn't be at school full-time, Blackburn feared she'd end up sacrificing even more money to stay home and shepherd her daughter through remote learning.

"It made sense for us to pay for it, so my husband and I could continue our own professional goals," said Blackburn, who lives in Oklahoma City and works in marketing for the state. "In order for her to progress in her education and for us to maintain our lifestyle, this was the best option."

Anecdotal evidence suggests that an increasing number of affluent parents are giving up on public schools in the COVID-19 era, sending their kids to private schools in pursuit of in-person learning. The aim, as with the advent of "[learning pods](#)," is to insulate their children from the downsides of remote schooling and the confusion around hybrid school. Many also want to get back to a normal workday.

The flight of wealthy families away from public schools is just one more way the coronavirus is widening [existing inequalities](#) in the U.S., and a sign of how well-off Americans can buy their way out of at least some of the side effects of this pandemic. What this means for the public education system is worrying. Richer families pulling out of schools could worsen the disparities between well-resourced children and their less advantaged peers.

At the end of the 2019-2020 school year, the average student likely fell months behind due to COVID-related learning disruptions, [research shows](#). Low-income students and students of color likely suffered from the greatest learning loss. Students in the highest-poverty districts are more likely to be starting school remotely this year, according to the [Center for Reinventing Public Education](#).

All parents are in a tough spot. But not all parents have the resources that make private school an option.

Blackburn struggled with her decision, though it felt like the right one for her family. She feared that if her daughter attended school only part-time, she or her husband would have to cut back on work, or even quit their jobs, in order to help educate her. Paying tuition is cheaper than quitting her job, she noted.

“Even in my own friend group they’re having to make difficult decisions, and to say we took her back to private makes me feel gross,” she said. “It was a clear exercise of privilege. I feel guilty.”

In the spring, private schools were warning of COVID-19’s catastrophic effect on their finances, calling on legislators to provide them with considerable relief. Families could no longer afford tuition amid the widespread economic tumult, they said, and fundraiser events had been canceled or delayed.

But many private schools may have found themselves in a better position than public schools to reopen for in-person learning. They tend to have smaller class sizes, fewer students and less administrative bureaucracy, all of which may have helped some schools stave off financial devastation.

Over 80% of private Catholic schools are reopening in person, said Kathy Mears, interim president and CEO of the National Catholic Education Association, compared to about half of school districts in the country, according to an analysis from the Center on Reinventing Public Education.

Around 130 Catholic schools have permanently closed since the beginning of the pandemic. But Mears believes that increased interest from affluent families has helped avoid further closures, although overall enrollment appears to be down.

“The schools in suburban areas seem to be doing better, in that they do in many cases have waiting lists because the public schools maybe are opening remotely,” Mears said. “Three weeks ago I wouldn’t have thought we would be having this conversation.”

Urban Catholic schools that serve lower-income students and provide more scholarships are continuing to struggle — they haven’t seen an influx of students — making it more difficult for the schools to subsidize scholarships for their needier kids. “It would be nice if those areas had waiting lists,” Mears said.

An August survey of more than 400 schools, from the National Association of Independent Schools, found that just over half had reported maintaining or increasing enrollment from the previous year. While some schools said they’d been flooded with calls from parents looking to enroll, others were hit hard by a sharp decline, especially from international students.

Some fully virtual private schools even reported an increase in interest. About 40% of schools in the organization’s survey said they would be opening fully in-person, compared to about half of districts, though most of these districts are in rural areas.

“My sense of the situation is that parents were just thinking, ‘Gosh, what am I going to do? Something here is not meeting my needs or I just need to figure out what options I have available,’” said Myra McGovern, vice president of media for the National Association of Independent Schools. “What suits you in May might not suit you in July.”

Another parent, Amy, who asked that her last name not be used to protect her family's privacy, also pulled her daughter out of public school this year in favor of private school. The private school is fully in-person, while the public school is not. It's a decision she continues to wrestle with, as she knows not everyone gets to make this choice.

"There's a lot of guilt among all of us. We were all planning to stay with public school, and knowing we're making this choice is heartbreaking," said Amy, who owns a tutoring company and lives in California.

Meanwhile, some public schools around the country struggle to provide lower-income students with laptops and hot spots for virtual learning. There are reports of students forced to work in Taco Bell and McDonald's parking lots to get Wi-Fi. Parents are struggling with quitting their jobs in order to provide child care.

"I feel really lucky," said Amy, who is paying \$27,000 a year for her daughter's private school, and \$42,000 a year for her son, who was already attending a private school.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, has been tracking the number of permanent private school closures via news reports. So far it has counted at least 118 — likely a steep underestimate. While there's anecdotal evidence of richer families flocking to private schools, Cato's Neal McCluskey suspects that these stories obscure the one-third of private schools that enroll fewer than 50 students, and that may be quietly struggling.

All in all, though, the situation is much rosier than McCluskey anticipated. In July, he co-wrote an op-ed for The Baltimore Sun warning that "private schools are in existential trouble." Now he's not so sure.

"My expectation was that we would see hundreds of announcements of private schools going out of business," said McCluskey, director of Cato's Center for Educational Freedom. "We definitely haven't seen that."

The dire financial circumstances facing private schools were used as partial justification for a U.S. Department of Education rule that would force public schools to share a large amount of their CARES Act aid, meant for disadvantaged students, with private schools. That rule has encountered a litany of legal challenges and faced a rejection in court.

"A growing list of nonpublic schools have announced they will not be able to reopen, and these school closures are concentrated in low-income and middle-class communities," U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos wrote in a May letter to the Council of Chief State School Officers, in an effort to justify the rule.

It's unclear if voucher programs, which provide taxpayer-funded scholarships for low-income students to attend private schools, are similarly seeing any type of application bump. In Florida, where a vast majority of public schools are offering in-person learning, one of the state's scholarship programs saw a surge in applications in July, after months of dormancy. Overall, it seems as though the program will provide the same number of low-income children with scholarships as it did last year.

"In past years, we have had so much demand so early on that application season gets closed in June or July," said Patrick Gibbons, public affairs manager for Step Up for Students, the group

that manages these scholarships. “This year we are still open. Parents are slowly deciding what they want to do.”

At First Baptist Academy in Dallas, head of school Jason Lovvorn says enrollment is up 5%. Few families left — the school offered generous aid to those who could no longer afford it. Then he saw a surge in interest from parents over the summer, after public schools struggled to define their plans. First Baptist Academy announced early that it would open for in-person learning.

“I wasn’t sure what this summer would hold when it came to new families,” Lovvorn said. “I was pleasantly surprised. We were prepared for a decrease.”

Like many other parents, Blackburn, in Oklahoma City, said she found remote learning for her daughter last year overwhelming to the point of uselessness. This year, even if she or her husband were to quit their jobs, she doesn’t feel either of them has the skills necessary to help supervise remote learning.

“My heart goes out to people who are having to make the decision to quit my job or educate my kid,” she said.