



The GOP's Big 2022 Issue: School Reopening

Lauren Camera

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Republicans hope that hammering Democrats about school reopenings will be their key to the majority in 2022.

ROUGHLY THREE-QUARTERS of students in the U.S. attend a school that's open for in-person learning. But you wouldn't know that from the GOP's insistence that President Joe Biden is plotting with teachers unions to keep them closed – a strategic line of attack that's motivating and expanding their base, elevating their school choice agenda and one they hope they can ride into the 2022 election cycle.

"Millions of American children are having their futures destroyed by Joe Biden's anti-science school closures," former President Donald Trump said Sunday at this year's Conservative Political Action Conference in Orlando, in his first major speech since departing the White House. "There's no reason whatsoever why the vast majority of young Americans should not be back in school immediately. The only reason that most parents do not have that choice is because Joe Biden has sold out America's children to the teacher's unions."

"His position is morally inexcusable," he continued. "Joe Biden has shamefully betrayed America's youth, and he is cruelly keeping our children locked in their homes, no reason for it whatsoever."

In reality, the question of whether schools reopen remains largely out of Biden's control since the bulk of decision-making authority falls to local districts. Even the majority of states have been hesitant to try to force districts to reopen – though there are signs that's changing. It's also unclear how the new variants of the virus may push school systems back into virtual learning, as Director of the Center for Disease Control and Prevent Director Rochelle Walenksy said recently is not out of the realm of possibility.

And despite Trump's rhetoric, the Biden administration is taking a decidedly more hands-on approach to reopening K-12 schools than his predecessor, whose top education official said it was not her responsibility or that of the federal government to provide school districts with data and strategies for how they could safely reopen.

Biden, for his part, has promised to reopen the majority of elementary and middle schools for in-person learning during the first 100 days of his administration, directed the CDC to release school reopening guidelines, tasked the Education Department's Institute for Education Sciences with creating a database of school districts reopening strategies and is trying to direct \$130 billion in federal relief to K-12 schools to help with the costs of reopening. Department officials already published a handbook for school leaders about how to turn CDC's recommendations into a reality. And Education Secretary Miguel Cardona, who the Senate

confirmed earlier this week, spent the first few days on the job touring reopened schools in Connecticut and Pennsylvania and is in the process of planning a school reopening summit to bring together the country's best educators and K-12 policy makers to make a plan for how the country moves forward.

Yet reopening schools for in-person learning – and specifically Biden's perceived inability to oversee a tidy return to classrooms – has become an anthem for Republicans. And given the increasingly partisan nature of the controversial school reopening debate, there's little appetite for nuance on the matter, which has helped pave the way for the GOP's new line of attack.

"It's a scandal of the highest order, and one of the most graven acts by any president in our lifetimes," Trump said, speaking to the majority white crowd – a demographic that increasingly favors reopening schools over Black and Latino parents. " I call on Joe Biden to get the schools open and get them open now."

The narrative does a lot of heavy lifting for Republicans: It acknowledges the very real concerns about academic, social and emotional learning loss incurred by children during the pandemic, the mounting mental health crises among young people and the uptick in self-harm and suicides reported in some communities. It provides a direct blow to teachers unions, whose members scored some major wins during a series of historic strikes that swept the country before the pandemic. It appeals directly to suburban women who bolted from the GOP during the 2020 presidential election, many of whom are growing weary as they continue to proctor their children's Zoom and Google Meet classes. And perhaps most importantly, it elevates conservatives' top education priority, school choice policies.

Of course Trump was not the first to connect the dots, and he won't be the last.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, Kentucky Republican, first signaled the GOP's intention to make school reopenings a wedge issue last month, when, in a speech on the floor of the Senate, he accused Biden of putting politics ahead of science and tethered the White House's position on schools reopening to teachers union leaders, who McConnell said are obstructing reopening efforts despite mounting data suggesting it's safe.

"As the months have rolled by and the data have poured in, it's become clear that schools can open safely," he said. "An administration that puts facts and science first would be conducting a full-court press to open schools."

His remarks followed the publication of a small-scale study by the CDC of 17 schools in rural Wisconsin that found that schools may be able to maintain a low risk of coronavirus transmission, even when community infection rates are high – a finding that, at the time, gave ammunition to policy makers on both sides of the aisle who had been hesitant to voice any type of full-throated endorsement of in-person learning, especially since the CDC still hadn't published guidance on reopening schools.

By the time the CDC released that guidance two weeks later, the narrative was cemented.

It didn't matter that Walensky said that the majority of school districts in the country fall into the highest-risk category for reopening and that elementary schools should only be operating on a hybrid model while middle and high schools remain virtual. It didn't matter that a U.S. News analysis of the 20 biggest school districts in the country showed that the majority are pushing the

new guidance to the max, either offering instruction that's exactly in line with the upper bounds set by the government's top public health officials or exceeding what they deem safe. It didn't matter that the country's foremost school tracker was estimating that nearly 70% of schools in the U.S. are already offering some type of in-person learning.

Republicans had found what they considered to be a winning issue – and they went to work.

Congressional Republicans introduced a slew of amendments to the budget reconciliation bill – the vehicle for the president's \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief package – trying to condition any new federal aid to schools that have reopened for in-person learning. And Rep. Tom Emmer, Minnesota Republican and chairman of the National Republican Congressional Committee, gave marching orders to his caucus to nail Democrats for failing to reopen schools.

The conservative and influential American Action Network put up billboards and unleashed a flurry of digital ads and robocalls last month highlighting how much money Democrats took from teachers unions in campaign contributions. The efforts targeted vulnerable Democrats in about a dozen congressional districts.

"Kids are falling behind, yet liberals in Congress seem not to care," Dan Conston, president of the American Action Network, said. "Even though the science shows it's safe for children to return to school, teachers unions continue to keep students locked out of their classrooms."

And now, as Republicans continue criticizing Democrats for failing to reopen schools for in-person learning, a majority of states are considering legislation that would allow some parents to tap into different education options for their children. As it stands, at least 31 states are considering some type of school choice legislation, according to Ed Choice, a policy organization that advocates for all types of school choice policies.

"COVID-19 has driven home the need for options, even in the wealthier districts where people tend to be satisfied with their schools," says Neal McClusky, director of education policy at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think-tank in Washington, D.C. "New people have been brought into the fold or at least have started to see the need for school choice who maybe didn't before COVID-19. I don't recall having seen this many states having serious debates about school choice legislation in the past."

National polling by American Federation for Children, a school choice advocacy organization, showed a 10 point jump between last April and August in support for the concept of school choice, from 67% to 77%, from parents with kids in public schools.

"Our teams on the ground were fielding a flurry of inquiries from families about available educational options beyond their district schools," says Tommy Schultz, vice president of communications and marketing at American Federation for Children, adding that the organization's parent advocate database grew by 700,000 in 2020 alone.

"The teachers unions' attempts to utilize this crisis for political extortion have caused a boom in parents seeking changes to our educational landscape," he says. "Families clearly want something different."

Notably, the uptick in legislation is getting the attention of national organizations that see it as an opportunity to use the school reopening debate to secure some early conservative wins leading up to a competitive 2022 election cycle.

Most recently, the cash-flush and powerful Club for Growth dumped more than \$160,000 to fund a TV ad campaign accusing Iowa House Speaker Pat Grassley, a Republican and grandson of U.S. Sen. Chuck Grassley, also an Iowa Republican, of stalling a bill that would give some parents tax credit scholarships and loosen restrictions on charter schools, among other things.

"The ongoing unnecessary school closures are making this painfully obvious to parents that they should determine how their education tax dollars are spent instead of self-interested bureaucrats," says David McIntosh, president of the conservative Club for Growth, which has been backing such legislative efforts in a handful of states.

McIntosh says the Club for Growth is actively looking for opportunities to help states pass all types of school choice legislation.

"States like Iowa and others are beginning to look at legislation that will help parents get their children out of failed schools," he says. "We will aggressively help them pass those reforms. Our PACs will support candidates who show that they actually will do something – pass bills, enact reforms, take care of the children, and not just pay lip service to a slogan."

The big question is whether the line of attack about Biden, Democrats and their so-called refusal to reopen schools has staying power a year from now when the 2022 races are in full swing and COVID-19 is expected to be less of a pressing issue.

"We may be overestimating how unhappy people are," McClusky says. "Clearly there are a lot of people who wish they had more options, but when you look at the polling you're seeing that most people are kind of getting what they wanted."

Indeed, recent polling shows that not only do a majority of parents prefer their children learning at home, but the vast majority are happy with the way their children are receiving instruction, whether it be virtual, hybrid or in-person. McClusky estimates that when it's all said and done, about 3% to 5% of families will decide to homeschool or enroll their children in private schools as a result of their public school experience during COVID-19.

"My sense is that most people, when COVID-19 is over, are going to just be happy to get back to the way things were before COVID-19," he says. "And for most people that means they will send their kids to neighborhood public schools."

In politics, people often have short memories but Republicans are betting that parents will remember school closures – and blame Democrats for them – in 2022.