



## As Maryland public schools go online this fall, private and parochial schools are ready to welcome students on campus

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As Maryland's public schools announced their decisions to keep their doors closed at least for the beginning of the school year, private schools have done just the reverse — arguing they have the ability to give families the in-person classes they want while keeping students safe.

Because of their small size, some experts say, private and Catholic schools are better able to make quick adjustments to their curriculum and often have more physical space to spread students out. But financial forces and teachers unions are also shaping public and private school decisions.

“The driver has been meeting the needs of our students,” said Donna Hargens, the superintendent of Catholic schools in the Baltimore archdiocese. “The interpersonal interaction is essential to the learning process, and we know that some of our students struggled with remote learning, especially those with learning needs.”

Public schools, meanwhile, often have to cope with tightly packed classrooms and buses, and **pressure from unions not to reopen.**

In Montgomery County, health officials won't be giving private schools the option of reopening. On Friday, County Health Officer Travis Gayles ordered all nonpublic schools to remain closed through Oct. 1, arguing in-person classes remain too dangerous for students and teachers. Gov. Larry Hogan, a Republican, tweeted his disapproval of the decision Saturday, saying it should be up to schools and parents to make calls on reopening schools, not politicians.

What makes a school seem safe is being debated furiously across social media this week as parents and teachers begin to confront the decisions being made by schools.

Students who enter archdiocesan schools will be required to fill out health questionnaires, have their temperatures checked, wear masks and be socially distanced inside classrooms. Students will eat in their classrooms, go outside for what the archdiocese is calling mask breaks, and teachers — not students — will rotate through the halls.

Because Catholic school parents get their children to and from school, Hargens said her schools have an advantage over public schools, which are required to provide transportation. Public school leaders say one of the impediments to starting school has been how to safely transport students on buses that can only hold a fraction of the number of students they usually carry.

Hargens said most of their schools are very small with only a few hundred students and have the ability to expand classroom spaces by using common areas such as gyms and cafeterias.

The Archdiocese of Baltimore schools are like many Catholic schools across the nation that have decided to stay open, said Luis Huerta, an associate professor of education and public policy at Teachers College in New York City.

One of the very problems that has plagued Catholic schools over the past several decades — declining enrollment — may be what is now making it possible for those same schools to stay open, he said.

“The Catholic schools right now are more nimble in their ability to open because they have lost market share and have more open seats,” said Huerta.

Private schools — particularly those with high price tags, large endowments and posh campuses — also may have more physical space that allows distancing, he said. Several Baltimore-area private schools, including Boys’ Latin, Friends School and The Park School of Baltimore, declined to be interviewed for this article or did not respond to requests for interviews. Most private schools in the region have told parents they intend to have at least some in-person classes in the fall.

The state of Maryland, on the other hand, has encouraged its public school systems in recent years to build larger elementary schools, holding up to 700 students each, and many Central Maryland schools are at capacity or require portable classrooms.

Neal McCluskey, director of the Center on Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute, said some private schools may see enrollment grow as public school parents leave in search of in-person schools.

McCluskey said Catholic and private schools have an advantage in the marketplace if they offer in-person instruction and public schools don’t. “Most are likely to see greater stability in their enrollment if they open.”

The Cato Institute tracked the closure of about 100 Catholic schools in the early months of the pandemic, including the Institute of Notre Dame in Baltimore, Maryland’s oldest all-girls prep school. **IND said it was closing, in part, because of the pandemic.** The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops was predicting the most closures since 2012, but those closures appear to have stopped, perhaps, McCluskey said, because public school parents are beginning to move to Catholic schools.

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Hargen said they are receiving an increase in applications, although they will only accept as many students as they can hold and still adhere to federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines.

The decision by public schools is sending many parents in search of alternatives.

“Unfortunately, I think I am going to have to home-school her,” said Rachael Latini, who lives in the Towson area and has a Baltimore County third grader. “There is literally no way we can

commit to having her online at certain times of the day and do three hours of independent work.” Latini said she, a dental hygienist, and her husband, an electrician, must go to work.

Their daughter will have to go to work with one of them or stay at home alone, she said. “I have looked into everything. I am running out of options.”

She first considered joining a pod, a group of students of the same age who spend time in someone’s house to do remote learning or with a tutor. But, she said, other families don’t want their children exposed to her child because Latini and her husband work outside the house.

She said they looked into day care, but spots are difficult to find and the prices have risen because many are offering to oversee remote teaching.

“We have been priced out of day care,” Latini said.

Public school leaders acknowledge the difficult choice Latini and her family are facing, but McCluskey and others say there are many factors driving decisions about whether to reopen.

“If you are a governor or a superintendent, the incentives may be that you are conservative about safety,” McCluskey said. “If one person gets COVID, you feel responsibility,” he said. But in the case of private and parochial schools, parents are paying money and making a choice to send their children and have decided to take the risk.

Teachers unions in Maryland and across the nation are also playing a role in pressuring school leaders to stay with online teaching to begin the year. Unions representing nearly all the state’s teachers have expressed opposition to a return to classrooms for at least the first semester, and earlier this week one of the nation’s largest teachers unions authorized its teachers to strike if their school districts don’t take proper safety precautions.

Del. Kathy Szeliga, a Republican representing portions of Baltimore and Harford counties, said that “we care about the safety of our kids and those who work in the public schools,” but that she believes the teachers unions have had “undue influence over the decision-making.”

Catholic and private school teachers don’t have unions that can speak out for them if teachers feel uncomfortable in the classroom. Hargens said they are working with their teachers to ensure they feel safe, guiding them through what classrooms will look and feel like and going over protocols.

The disparity between private schools going back to in-person instruction and public schools staying closed appears to be a national trend, according to McCluskey, although there is only anecdotal information so far.

If that trend holds, advocates of the use of vouchers are hoping to see an increase in pressure from parents who want to use federal money to fund private school tuition, as U.S. education secretary Betsy DeVos has championed.

Many **parents were broadly dissatisfied with the remote learning** offered in the spring, but they accepted that it was temporary, particularly as public schools began planning through the summer for in-person instruction.

But that quickly changed in Maryland in the past two weeks, as one large district after another began announcing it would be going online for the first semester. In the past two days, Carroll

and Frederick counties, with more conservative-leaning populations, have announced online learning.