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How the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the future of private schools

There have been some surprising silver linings.

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Among its many effects, COVID-19 upended almost every aspect of our education system, forcing administrators and instructors at all levels to adapt hastily and find ways to educate our nation's children and young people. As it continues to hold the nation in its grip, the pandemic tests our basic ideas about instruction, testing, funding, technology and the human connections that hold them all together.

When the nation went into lockdown in the spring of 2020, there was particular concern about the fate of private schools, which survive only if people pay for them. Going into the pandemic, many already had thin financial margins. To pay for operations, they rely not only on tuition, but also on special fundraisers.

COVID-19 forced private schools to cancel in-person events, and many families tightened their budgets, making private school a less viable option. At the same time, families that could still afford private school wondered if it was worthwhile to continue paying tuition for education that was going to be — at least temporarily — only online.

Cato Institute Study

To date, one of the most complete studies about COVID-19's impact on the nation's private schools was conducted by the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom (CEF). The CEF sought to determine, among other things, the number of private schools that closed permanently, at least in part due to the effects of the pandemic.

The CEF determined that 132 U.S. private schools had closed — a surprisingly small number when you remember the nation has more than 34,000 private schools educating almost 5 million

students. The number of closures was further reduced to 122 when accounting for school mergers.

Increased interest in enrollment

Beyond a smaller-than-expected closure rate, there was something of a silver lining for private schools in the midst of the crisis.

Prior to the pandemic, private school enrollment had been on a gradual decline. According to the U.S. Department of Education, roughly 50.8 million students are enrolled in public schools, compared to 5.8 million in private schools.

Yet, because of their independent status, private schools often have more flexibility when deciding to reopen for in-person instruction. If parents can send their children to school in person, it alleviates the day care burden and, in many cases, allows those parents to return to the office or work at home with minimal interruptions.

Commenting on this seeming contradiction — moving from free public education to private education during a time of crisis and uncertainty — Emily Glickman, president of Abacus Guide Educational Consulting in New York, says, “I am seeing unprecedented interest from the public school community seeking entrance into private schools.”

Local innovations

In the D-FW area, private schools often have found ways to continue and even expand their operations, despite the challenges posed by the pandemic. One example is the Greenhill School in Addison.

Greenhill School Director of Admissions Sarah Markhovsky points out that her school has developed new ways to include more parents in school-related conferences and activities. She says, “Last year, we offered all of our parent programming and teacher conferences via an online format, which was incredibly helpful for many families who might need to travel long distances to arrive at campus. Moving forward, we plan to continue to offer families the option of conducting parent-teacher conferences either in person or online. We also plan to offer webinar formats for some of our educational events for families, giving more families the opportunity to participate.”

And the future?

The great question is, of course, whether private schools can maintain their increased enrollment and attract even more students when the pandemic subsides and the nation returns to a degree of normalcy.

Cost will certainly be a major factor in the education equation. If you define private schools broadly to include parochial schools, which generally are subsidized, the average cost of private education across all grades averages slightly more than \$11,000 per year. But some of this cost can be offset with financial aid, and currently about a quarter of families whose children attend private schools receive financial aid.

In response to growing interest in their institutions, many private school administrators are looking for new sources of financial aid while attempting to reduce tuition costs. And in a further effort to increase enrollment, many private schools now offer extended care options, such as early drop-offs and late pickups.

So, as parents begin returning to the office, weighing the cost of schooling versus paying for a babysitter or coordinating pickups, many who made the plunge to private education may well decide to stay there, especially if their child is flourishing in this new atmosphere.