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The Education Lesson from COVID-19: School Choice Is Imperative for Every Child

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

During the COVID-19 pandemic, parents have changed the prevailing education landscape.

Parents were the first to create "learning pods," and as the idea spread, school districts adopted parents' ideas.

Policymakers should update other aspects of public education, such as assignment by Zip Code, replacing these antiquated policies with student-centered options.

In fall 2020, parents found new ways to help their children learn amid uncertain school-district plans for school re-openings. The defining feature of the new education landscape emerging from the pandemic is that many families are no longer waiting for school-district solutions, and are giving themselves permission to choose how and where their children learn when assigned schools are closed, including finding—or creating—new learning opportunities.

Research on the economic impact of school closures underscores just how important it is to continue student learning. A *Barron*'s report estimates that school closures could result in $700 billion in lost revenue.[1] Eric Hanushek and Ludger Woessmann estimate that K–12 students should anticipate a lifetime loss of 3 percent of their incomes due to the pandemic-induced school closures.[2]

But not all students stopped learning in March 2020. Parent and student instructional choices during the pandemic are changing the defining features of assigned-school education offerings, increasing private school opportunities, and adding new learning options such as creating pods and microschools. Members of three distinct groups—(1) the traditional public school sector, (2) the charter school and private school sector, and (3) parents—faced the same pandemic and responded in measurably different ways. This *Backgrounder* reviews the reactions, experiences, and plans for the future of the three stakeholder groups of these K–12 learning alternatives, and explains what these choices mean for the future of students' academic success.

Traditional school districts may find empty seats when schools return to in-person instruction, demonstrating that school-assignment systems are not only outdated, but consistently ineffective at meeting student needs. The private education landscape has also changed. Private schools are one component, albeit an important one, on a growing list of private-school or home-based learning opportunities. The learning pods that parents created during the pandemic add yet another potential alternative for parents when an assigned school is not meeting their child's needs.

Finally, and as result of these pandemic-induced changes, state policymakers need to re-examine traditional long-standing K–12 schooling policies. Chief among such traditions in need of updating is the residential assignment model of public education—a structural barrier that has limited educational opportunity for children from low-income, and even middle-income, families.

Potential Long-Term Impacts of COVID-19 on Education: A Three-Sector Analysis

Public Schools. Enrollment figures from the first day of school in the 2020–2021 school year from large U.S. school districts demonstrate that the pandemic caused a measurable shift in student attendance at the beginning of the year between public, private, and home learning options, especially among young students.

The policy implications of these district school enrollment changes are twofold: First, traditional school assignment policies are no longer necessary for parents and students. Parents do not have to wait for districts to re-open buildings for in-person learning, or for a teacher strike to end, for example, before seeking alternative learning options. Second, state lawmakers should enact fiscally responsible school funding measures that do not hold districts harmless when parents seek other opportunities.

First, while year-over-year enrollment numbers will not be available until the end of the 2020–2021 school year, a Gallup survey from August 2020 found that the percent of parents choosing a traditional public school for their oldest child dropped by 7 percentage points since 2019.[3] The percentage of parents choosing to homeschool doubled from 5 percent to 10 percent, while the percentage choosing a charter school nearly tripled from 2 percent to 5 percent.[4]

Figures from state organizations support these survey numbers. The Texas Homeschool Coalition reported a 400 percent increase in families withdrawing from state public schools through the coalition's website to homeschool in August 2020 compared to August 2019.[5] In July 2020, the coalition reported a 1,500 percent year-over-year increase in homeschoolers. Also in July, the Vermont Department of Education reported that homeschooling enrollment had increased by 75 percent over homeschooling figures since July 2019.[6] Similar reports can be found around the country and help to explain how some of these students no longer enrolled in assigned schools are learning in areas where school buildings were closed for prolonged periods.[7]

Such figures demonstrate that parent dissatisfaction with extended periods of school district virtual learning programs, along with school districts' inability to maintain contact with thousands of students in a virtual environment, are resulting in school-attendance changes. In New Mexico, school officials reported that 12,000 students enrolled in the last school year were unaccounted for this fall.[8] In neighboring Arizona, some 50,000 students "vanished" from Arizona's public district and charter schools, according to a review of preliminary enrollment data by local media (more on Arizona's largest school district below).[9] Media outlets and education officials around the country have released similar reports of "lost" students.[10]

Meanwhile, according to the *New York Times*, Massachusetts school officials reported a drop in enrollment of 4 percent statewide at the beginning of the 2020–2021 school year.[11] New York City, the nation's largest school district, had 3 percent fewer students enrolled. The *Times* reported similar figures from Montana, Wisconsin, Missouri, and North Carolina.

Data from large U.S. school districts finds similar trends. Between the 2017–2018 school year and the 2019–2020 school year, enrollment in Arizona's largest school district, Mesa Unified, remained relatively constant, despite a statewide teacher strike in 2018 that closed schools for one week. Between the 2017–2018 and 2019–2020 school years, enrollment changed little, decreasing by 0.4 percent.[12]

After moving to virtual instruction in spring 2020 due to the pandemic, however, and re-opening in the fall with online-only options, the district school board reported that enrollment declined by 5.6 percent overall at the beginning of the 2020–2021 school year since the previous year.[13] The decreases were larger in the younger grades than in high school, with a 9.6 percent decrease in elementary school (previous year-to-year changes averaged a 1.7 percent decrease) and a 16.8 percent decrease in kindergarten enrollment.[14]

Today, approximately 20 percent of Arizona public school students attend charter schools, a figure that has steadily increased for 25 years.[15] Thus, the percentage change in kindergarten students alone in Arizona's largest school district from the end of the past school year to the beginning of the 2020–2021 school year was nearly as large, in percentage terms, as the share of students moving to Arizona charter schools over the course of 25 years.[16]

For the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), the second-largest school district in the U.S., LAUSD Superintendent Austin Beutner reports that overall enrollment has declined by 11,000 students (3.4 percent) since the beginning of the 2019–2020 school year.[17] The LAUSD also opened exclusively online. Officials have not been able to contact another 4 percent of the previous year's enrollees, which means that the total enrollment change is closer to 7.4 percent.[18] The 3.4 percent figure is comparable to prior years, but the number of kindergarteners dropped by 6,000 children, triple the enrollment decrease among kindergarteners that LAUSD has recorded in recent school years, according to the superintendent.[19]

Officials in the sixth-largest school district in the U.S., Florida's Broward County School District, reported a first-week enrollment decline of 3.5 percent overall from the past school year.[20] Among elementary school students, Broward district saw a 5.5 percent decrease. Like Mesa and LAUSD, Broward only offered online options to start the new school year.

The Houston Independent School District (ISD), the eighth-largest U.S. school district, reported a 16 percent enrollment dip at the end of its first full week of school.[21] The district had not contacted approximately 2,000 students missing since the district moved online in spring 2020. As with Mesa, LAUSD, Broward, and other school districts facing decreases, students may yet return as schools announce re-opening plans, but these figures may not be available until the end of the school year. However, by the end of October 2020, Houston ISD enrollment was still down by nearly 15,000 students. (Some 210,000 students were enrolled in Houston ISD schools in the 2019–2020 school year according to the Texas Education Agency.)[22]

Again, it will not be possible to measure the full impact of pandemic-related enrollment changes until the end of this school year in spring 2021, but should these numbers hold, parents will have demonstrated that significant shifts in student attendance are possible, especially among younger students—and that traditional districts have lost contact with tens of thousands of students during the pandemic. In the future, this means that parents will find other options for their children and district schools will struggle to maintain communication with students when, say, special interest groups close schools again, especially in prolonged labor strikes.

In recent years, statewide teacher strikes in West Virginia, Oklahoma, and Arizona, along with city-wide strikes in Chicago and Los Angeles, closed schools for days, even weeks at a time—but since parents did not know when the strikes would end, the school closures made policymakers and parents alike wonder how much learning students would lose and disrupted parent work commitments. During the pandemic, these unions are once again exerting their influence. On November 2, the Washington Teachers' Union voted "no confidence" in the District of Columbia Public Schools' re-opening plans, and the agency decided not to resume in-person learning, as originally scheduled, before the end of the calendar year.[23] National union officials endorsed such action over the summer, with American Federation of Teachers' President Randi Weingarten announcing the special interest group's "backing" of local chapter strikes in the absence of "safe" conditions and "hundreds of billions of dollars in resources."[24]

Families, especially parents in low-income areas that do not have access to technology that makes online classes possible, should not feel trapped in assigned schools when school districts are closed to in-person learning. According to the Pew Research Center, 72 percent of parents in lower-income brackets report being "very" or "somewhat" concerned this fall that their children are "falling behind in school as a result of the disruptions caused by the pandemic."[25] For the duration of the pandemic, and the next time unions decide to close schools with strikes, policymakers should immediately lift residential-school-assignment policies so that parents who cannot create new learning options through pods or pay private school tuition can seek out public schools that remain open. More details on such a policy proposal are discussed below under "Parents and Learning Pods."

Second, taxpayers should not be required to pay for empty seats in a district school. Policymakers in some states have adopted such hold-harmless policies in the pandemic. For example, Texas schools will not be held responsible for "major decreases in student attendance for the first 12 weeks of the year."[26] Lawmakers in California and North Carolina have

also promised not to reduce district school funding based on enrollment changes.[27] In Tennessee, the state board of education wrote Governor Bill Lee in August to say that enrollment declines will be a problem for schools statewide this year and requested that schools be held harmless financially if enrollment declines this year.[28]

Such decisions are not fiscally responsible, however. Writing in *Education Next*, Georgetown University professor Marguerite Roza and Edunomics Lab research fellow Hannah Jarmoloski say, "Today, when state revenues are collapsing, an extra state dollar sent to a district via a hold-harmless clause means a deeper cut to another district—likely in the very districts that arguably need the most state aid."[29] They continue:

> Why tackle these provisions now? In many cases, doing away with hold-harmless provisions could free up money that can prevent the need for deeper cuts elsewhere. And in other cases, the clause simply means inequities will widen as the pool of state dollars shrinks (and hold-harmless districts continue to tap into local money).[30]

The learning options for students outside traditional school districts are only increasing, and policymakers have other ways to devote taxpayer resources that focus on student needs.

Private Schools. At the onset of the pandemic, the future for independent schools looked bleak. A Cato Institute project tracked private school closures, and after measuring a peak in July, individual reports from states suggest that the sector may yet rebound.[31] In September, Cato reported that three schools that were once on the closure list were able to re-open.[32] Again, as with public school enrollment, final calculations will not be available until the end of the school year in spring 2021, and while the Gallup survey cited above[33] finds a decrease in the percentage of parents choosing private schools, news reports from a wide range of states point to an increase in private school activity.[34]

In New Mexico, private schools in Albuquerque reported waiting lists at the beginning of the 2020–2021 school year, with the Albuquerque Christian Academy telling local media that enrollment is especially higher in elementary grades—the same grades where districts such as Mesa in Arizona and Broward in Florida report enrollment declines.[35] Similar reports, including stories of newly formed waiting lists and parents telling private school leaders that they are not satisfied with district school learning plans, have surfaced in Alabama, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Hampshire, New York, South Carolina, Washington State, and Detroit.

For parents who cannot afford private school tuition, Governors in three states have created new K–12 scholarship programs, one with an added provision that allows parents to purchase technology equipment to help families still facing virtual or hybrid school scenarios. South Carolina Governor Henry McMaster (R), New Hampshire Governor Chris Sununu (R), and Oklahoma Governor Kevin Stitt (R) each created new scholarship options using federal spending that Congress had already appropriated for K–12 use and given Governors discretion over how to spend the funds. (A South Carolina Supreme Court ruling struck down Governor McMaster's program.)[36] Even as the new school year began, a group of Rhode Island lawmakers announced a proposal to create education savings accounts (ESAs) for students assigned to districts where schools are not offering in-person classes, along with public school open enrollment for students in these districts.[37]

Parents around the country may be familiar with private school scholarship opportunities such as these even if they are not available in their state, but Oklahoma Governor Stitt also created "digital wallet grants," which will allow 5,000 students from low-income families to purchase "curriculum content, tutoring services and/or technology."[38] Such flexible spending is similar to the ESAs available in Arizona, Florida, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Tennessee, where policymakers allow students to use a portion of a child's funds from the state education spending formula to purchase a variety of products and services, including textbooks, private school tuition, education therapy services, and personal tutors.

Thus the pandemic has further ensconced the policy idea that private education does not just mean attendance at a specific school. Students need a variety of learning options, and state lawmakers must provide families with more than spending for assigned schools and even more than scholarship options for private schools. With ESAs already available in five states, and now, during a pandemic and widespread school closures, lawmakers who must decide how to use additional resources choosing to create flexible spending accounts—these are signals of a change in how private learning should be considered for the next generation.

As private schools experience a surge in parent interest at the beginning of the 2020–2021 school year and lawmakers make new scholarship opportunities available, one additional learning option has dominated the headlines and demonstrates that parents are taking matters into their own hands. One survey in January 2021 estimates that as many as 3 million children could be using learning pods, nearly the same as the number of children attending charter schools across the U.S.[39] "Learning pods" are casting ripple effects across public schools, private schools, and homeschooling.

Parents and Learning Pods. Emerson Warfield's first day of school was not like last year.[40] For this reason, and considering that millions of students may not go back to school in person at all this fall, hers is one of the important experiences that policymakers and families should be watching in the age of COVID-19. Emerson's mom, Sarrin, enrolled her in a learning pod, a dystopian-sounding name for a small group of families who hire a teacher to educate their children outside a traditional school setting this year.

"You're stepping out of what we've been socially normed to do," Sarrin explains. "You follow a rubric when you are a parent and send your kid to school. Creating your own concept is not the norm."

Across the country, thousands of parents dissatisfied with assigned-school-district attempts at online instruction during the spring are taking matters into their own hands. "Instead of this being a crazy idea," Sarrin said, "let's own this process and be really intentional about doing this, and make it happen."

Emerson has already had her first day of school, and Sarrin says, "It was like a dream come true." The pod of eight girls is led by a teacher and meets in one of the families' backyards. The parents held meetings over the summer to decide on a curriculum, and what started as a solution just for fall 2020 is now "a pilot program," says Sarrin.

"I'm just proud of all the women in this group for going against the grain and going against the norm and giving themselves permission to do something that is unexpected but that is going to create a very special experience for the girls," Sarrin says.

The Warfields' example is but one story of how parents are sharing their concerns about student learning with their neighbors and creating their own learning solutions. In Sarrin's case, her group hired an educator and chose its own curriculum. This model bears a striking resemblance to homeschool co-ops that homeschooling families have used to leverage access to teachers and specialists in certain fields who can teach homeschooled students in specific areas. There are still other examples of learning pods, however, and in some cases families are gathering students in small groups and following a district's online curriculum. This latter approach is still being called a "pod," which extends ever so slightly both the definition of a pod or at least adds to the ways in which parents can educate their children at home apart from a traditional homeschool model.

All of this activity led a *Washington Post* writer to say "nobody working in education today can escape pandemic learning pods" and teachers are "sketching out schedules and pondering whether they can squeeze in pod tutoring after virtual school."[41]

Parents and teachers are not the only ones embracing the pod idea. Even some school districts are creating pods.[42] In Indianapolis, state health officials went so far as to recommend that schools create pods.[43] As reported by Chalkbeat, the Adams 12 school district in Colorado is creating pods, and since nearly half of the students enrolled in Adams are eligible for federal meals, this effort begins to answer skeptics who worry that only students from wealthy families will have access to pods.

In Washington, DC, some families are using GoFundMe to raise money to create pods for students in low-income areas.[44] Likewise, private school leaders who serve low-income and even homeless children praised Oklahoma Governor Stitt's announcement of the new digital wallets to pay for electronic devices and private school scholarships, citing the Governor's emphasis on helping children in need.[45]

Over the past 150 years, public school policies and operations have increasingly been driven from the top down, epitomized perhaps by the federal government's support of national standards and the curricular materials that followed in the past decade. With pods, however, the pandemic and personal choices of parents have flipped the prevailing system-based education landscape. Parents were the first to create learning pods, and as the idea spread, school districts adopted parents' ideas. When school districts do not make the options available to families, individuals are raising money to help families in need. The pandemic has pushed parents away from the idea that they must wait for school districts to make a decision before families can act. Families were first with pods, and while the total "pod" enrollment is difficult to measure, enough families are doing so that districts are following. Even Broward County, cited above as one of the largest school districts in the country, is creating a small pod system.[46]

And here, with Broward County's example, parents waiting for school district administrators to develop solutions must temper their enthusiasm. Broward's program will only be available to 2,000 children. Likewise in Montgomery County, Maryland, districts are collaborating with private preschools to use currently empty school buildings for pods, which begs the question asked in *The Washington Post* as to why, if the buildings are suitable for pods, the classrooms cannot be used for in-person classes.[47] Special interest groups have long bragged about public schools' requirement to enroll any student that arrives for class, but in the pandemic, districts are creating exclusive options available to a limited few.[48] Even in the Adams district in Colorado mentioned above, more than 1,000 students were on a waiting list as of August 2020.[49]

Some state policymakers, including Colorado Governor Jared Polis (D), have waived certain childcare licensing requirements so that families can form pods.[50] This waiver will be welcome to families in Denver, the state's largest school district, where the district only offered virtual instruction for the first semester of the school year; but even waivers such as these limit the size of learning pods and treat pods as in-home daycare arrangements.[51] These temporary provisions leave unanswered questions over how pods will be treated in the future and whether policymakers can align legislative provisions for private schools, homeschooling, and customized education solutions, such as ESAs, with pods in the future to prevent daycare requirements from interfering with student learning.

So while parents find themselves in the unusual position of creating ideas and watching school districts follow, pods are vulnerable to regulations. This further demonstrates school districts' inclination to follow standardized models that tend toward regulation rather than the flexibility to adjust policies to meet student needs according to changing conditions. Here again, though, changes in parents' activities during the pandemic have implications for the future: Parents have demonstrated that they do not need to wait on district decisions in the face of uncertainty before taking action in their child's best interests.

Rethinking Residential Assignment Post-Pandemic

The pandemic has underscored the need for state policymakers to re-examine traditional K–12 schooling policies. Chief among them is the residential assignment model of public education—a structural barrier that has limited educational opportunity for children from low-income and even middle-income families.

More than 47 million children attend traditional public schools in the United States,[52] and more than 78 percent attend an assigned district school. Just 20 percent of students attend a public school chosen by their parents.[53] These enrollment trends are a function of the residential assignment model, whereby local school district officials establish attendance zones, assigning students to a public school located in an area that includes their parents' primary residence. Residential assignment, also referred to as "assignment by Zip Code," is a key reason why so many children experienced disruption to their education in the wake of COVID-19. Tethering homes to schools through the use of attendance zones meant that education funding was inseparable from school district assignment, flowing to children's assigned district school even when that school was or remains closed to in-person

instruction. This arrangement has been particularly ill-suited to maintaining education continuity during the pandemic, and has been a poor system for advancing educational opportunity for decades.

For example, schooling drives housing decisions, which are largely tied to income. There is an 11 percentage point difference between families with access to public school choice and families whose children would have to attend an assigned district school, reporting that they had moved to their neighborhood for the public school. That is, among parents of public school students who could choose their child's public school, 11.2 percent reported moving to their neighborhood for their public school. Twice that number—22.4 percent—of parents whose children attend an assigned public school reported moving to their neighborhood for that public school, meaning that school assignment was significantly more likely to factor into home selection for these families than for those who could choose a public school outside their residential Zip Code.[54]

This is evidenced by discrepancies in neighborhood mobility by income distribution. Although nearly one-quarter (24 percent) of parents who moved to their neighborhood did so to access the public school there, just 14 percent of "near-poor" families did so, and just 15 percent of poor families were able to do so. Higher levels of income increases families' ability to move into neighborhoods based on the public school that is there.[55] Families who can do so often take school quality into account when selecting a home.

The extent to which families can select schools is largely determined by the extent to which they can afford to select their neighborhood. Among households with children, half take school district quality into consideration when purchasing a home.[56] According to an analysis by the real estate brokerage firm Redfin, on average, families paid $50 more per square foot for houses in highly rated school districts in 2013. In one example, a home was priced $130,000 more than an identical home less than a mile away because it was in a highly rated school district and the other home was not. As the report found, "the price differences for similar homes located near each other but served by different schools can range from tens to hundreds of thousands of dollars."[57]

Notably, a 2019 analysis conducted by Vanessa Brown Calder at the Senate Joint Economic Committee found that "the average U.S. Zip code associated with the highest quality (A+) public elementary school has a 4-fold ($486,104) higher median home price than the average neighborhood associated with the lowest quality (D or less) public elementary schools ($122,061)."[58] Calder found that cities, such as Portland, Oregon, which uses residential assignment of schools while also having restrictive residential zoning regulations, are less effective at providing affordable, effective education to residents.

The quality and consistency of the education a child received during the pandemic has been dependent on the attendance boundary in which that child's family lives. That means that in the same state, and even within the same school district, students living in neighboring attendance zones could have had radically different learning experiences.

For example, the 16,519 students in Hanover County, Virginia, had access to full in-person instruction when school resumed in the fall, but the 50,191 students in neighboring Henrico County remained fully remote, with access only to district online learning.[59] That is a pattern that repeats itself in state after state throughout the country.

Separating housing from schooling by eliminating residential assignment practices in the states and attendance zones within districts would increase access to schools and education options of choice that are the right fit for students. It would also represent an important policy change in the post-COVID-19 era, insulating students from disruptions to their education by dramatically expanding the public schools to which they have access, enabling them to more easily select into district schools that are providing in-person instruction or remote instruction, according to their preferences.

As Education Secretary Betsy DeVos commented in late August, "schools must be open for in-person learning as an option for the families who want or who need it."[60] In other words, parents should have the option to send their children to in-person instruction or do remote learning, but schools need to be open in order for them to have that choice.

Policy Implications

Federal, state, and local policymakers should take the opportunity to re-examine policies that were not working well for families pre-pandemic, use what families and schools have learned during the pandemic, and change public policy moving forward to fit new realities on the ground. For their part, state policymakers should:

Adopt Open-Enrollment Among School Districts and Eliminate Attendance Zones Within School Districts. Open enrollment (eliminating district boundaries for public school assignment), effectively separates housing from schooling. Although 47 states have some form of open enrollment, the policies vary considerably, and many districts have the option to choose whether they will participate. For example, while Alabama provides no open enrollment options whatsoever, Alaska mandates that within-district open enrollment be available to students enrolled in persistently dangerous schools (conditional intradistrict open enrollment);

Arkansas mandates that interdistrict open enrollment be available to students in "distressed schools" (conditional interdistrict open enrollment between districts); Indiana has voluntary interdistrict enrollment and mandatory intradistrict enrollment; and Arizona has mandatory interdistrict and intradistrict open enrollment.[61] Although Arizona's open enrollment is mandatory for districts, school participation is voluntary. However, the robust charter school sector has created a powerful incentive for nearly every school to participate, meaning that students can attend practically any public school in the state.

At the same time, states should discourage public school districts across the state from establishing "attendance zones" that dictate in which public schools a child may enroll within the same district. All students should have access to all public schools within a district regardless of where their parents live. In the event that a given public school is oversubscribed—meaning there are more students interested in attending than available seats—the school should admit students by lottery.

Provide Education Savings Accounts to Parents. Eliminating district boundaries and residential zones for school attendance is a critical step in expanding education options within the public school sector. States should also expand private-school-choice options to give families the greatest range of education choices. States should adopt ESA options for families, allowing students to receive a portion of their state per-pupil funding in a parent-controlled account. Eligible students in Arizona, for example, can receive 90 percent of what the state would have spent on them in their public school in the form of an ESA, and can then use those funds to pay for private school tuition, online learning, special education services and therapies, and a host of other education-related providers, products, and services. ESAs are particularly well-suited to education in the post-COVID-19 era, enabling families to pay for options like learning pods and microschooling.

Maintain Pod-friendly Regulatory Environments. By one estimate, millions of families across the country formed pandemic pods in the wake of COVID-19. Even if that figure is smaller, state policymakers should continue to foster this learning option by avoiding layering restrictions on pods. When possible, Governors should waive regulations and licensure requirements that would limit pod growth, and state policymakers should refrain from regulating pods in the same manner as daycare centers.

Free Up the Supply of Teachers by Reducing Certification Barriers to the Classroom. Research suggests there is little if any connection between teacher certification and a teacher's impact on student academic achievement. In fact, there is no difference in teacher impact on student

math achievement among teachers who are traditionally certified, alternatively certified, and uncertified.[62] As parents pursue new learning arrangements for their children in the form of pods and microschools, states should clear away regulatory barriers to teaching for these new providers. States should lift state certification requirements and allow individuals with demonstrated subject matter expertise to teach a pod or microschool.

Lift Caps on Charter School Enrollment and Embrace Virtual Charter Schools. Forty-four states and the District of Columbia currently have charter school laws that allow charter schools to operate.[63] Remaining states without charter school laws should establish such provisions, to allow these publicly funded but privately managed schools to operate, and states that already allow them to operate should lift caps on enrollment. States should also allow virtual charter schools to operate, providing families with robust online learning options.

At the same time, Congress should:

Make Existing Federal Funding Student-Centered and Portable. Congress can provide more options for families, as well, though federal lawmakers should be careful not to expand the federal footprint in the process. Lawmakers should modernize the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to allow students to access at least 90 percent of their federal per-pupil IDEA funding in the form of micro-ESAs. These micro-ESAs could be used like regular ESAs to pay for private tutors; private school tuition; behavioral therapists; educational supports, such as manipulatives (for instance, number cubes, clocks, and color tiles) and educational technology; and other services and products.[64] Congress should undertake a similar reform to Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), streamlining the four existing Title I grant streams into a single, clear formula based on the number of children from low-income families by state. Congress should then allow states to make their Title I dollars portable, following a child from a low-income family to a private school or education provider of choice.[65]

Adopt the Policies in the Academic Partnerships Lead Us to Success (A-PLUS) Proposal. Another viable federal option regarding parent choice in education is to expand the A-PLUS proposal, introduced in various Congresses over the past two decades. This proposal would allow states to opt out of programs that fall under the ESEA and direct funding toward any education purpose or program authorized by state law. The proposal would give states the option to focus spending on education initiatives that work for their communities by freeing some $23 billion in federal funding authorized under the ESEA that otherwise would be used to fund dozens of ineffective and duplicative federal programs.

Conclusion

In March 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic closed schools for in-person instruction for some 55 million schoolchildren, families gave themselves permission to find—or create—the best learning option for their children. Early reports suggest that there could be a permanent uptick in the number of families who choose to homeschool, use a learning pod or microschool, or who enroll their children in private schools.

Policymakers should focus first and foremost on redesigning student assignment and school spending policies so that dollars fund students, rather than systems, and allow parents to choose the best learning option for their child. Doing so would not only prepare for education disruption caused by future external forces (such as pandemics) but would improve public policy and allow it to serve the needs of all American families.

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