

# POLICY *focus*

RECIPES FOR RATIONAL GOVERNMENT

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## Impact of COVID-19 on the Education System

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### What You Should Know

More than perhaps any other part of our normal life other than the healthcare system, the coronavirus pandemic has impacted education and schools. In response to the pandemic, in mid-March, nearly all schoolhouses in America suddenly closed their doors and transitioned to distance learning.

While some initial scrambling around was inevitable given the quick change of circumstances, public schools have not done a good job delivering online instruction to students, even months into this crisis. Both public and private schools will face a budget crunch as our weakened economy takes a toll on families as well as tax revenues.

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If parents are acting as primary educators, they should receive the flexibility, funding, and support they need to fulfill that role. In addition to making plans for reopening schools, policymakers and legislators should look to expand options like education savings accounts, which allow families to use funds on any educational purpose. Further, they should be curtailing unproductive “turf wars” between the traditional public, charter, virtual, and private school sectors. Families should be able to do what works best for them during this time.

As with any disaster, we can hope that some silver linings emerge from this crisis. If this moment re-centers parents—not politicians, district administrators, or schools—in their rightful place as the directors of their children’s educations, the cultural impacts could be positive and long-lasting, even as students eventually return to brick-and-mortar schools and normalcy.

## Why You Should Care

The pandemic and shutdowns will impact students and learning for years to come. But if parents and policymakers seize this opportunity to work together and provide more flexibility and options, not all the consequences of the COVID crisis could turn out to be bad ones. Here's where our focus should be:

- **Developing Good Options for Families:** While much of the focus has been on reopening schools as safely as possible, some families may prefer to continue schooling virtually or to officially switch to homeschooling. All families deserve the freedom and funds to make the choices that best suit their students.
- **Preparing for a Budget Crunch:** Schools will not be immune from the pandemic's impact on the economy. It is in everyone's interest to keep as many schools of all types, public and private, open as possible and to put as many dollars as possible into teacher pay and classroom resources, where they belong.
- **Restoring Education as the Primary Focus of Schools:** Today schools serve several important roles, but sadly, their role as social service distributors has overtaken their most critical role of educating the next generation of citizens. Social services, such as meals, are very important, but should be decoupled from schools, which should be for learning.

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## More Information

### COVID and Public Schools Slow Distance Learning Implementation

Many public schools were slow to implement distancing learning or teach new concepts, with only a small fraction teaching live over the internet in early weeks. Only towards the end of April did most schools **plateau** and stabilize the online options they were offering families, in most states at least six weeks after schoolhouses closed their doors. Even by May, when the school year comes to an end in many municipalities, just 44 percent of the districts surveyed by the American Enterprise Institute were offering full online instruction with new content and feedback for students.

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While parents generally report being moderately satisfied with their schools' attempts at distance learning, there are **large gaps** between reality and parents' reported desires—regular contact with teachers, examples of resources, or individualized instructional materials or resources for students with disabilities.

The critical delay happened for several reasons. First, some progressive district administrators placed equity concerns above pragmatism, and **actively curtailed** services to those who were prepared to do distance learning because of a small minority of children who were unable to connect for various reasons.

Concerns about students falling behind during distance learning are not wholly unfounded. The news has been full of dire warnings about “learning loss,” with some groups estimating a 40-60 percent reduction in learning gains for the entire year. Nearly nine in ten parents **report** being concerned about their child falling behind academically during this time. However, virtual charter schools already disproportionately serve students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and have figured out how to make online learning successful, delivering **academic gains** to students who perhaps need those gains the most.

The ideological choice to cease teaching because of inequity worries punished all students in districts that made it, rather than focusing district attention on finding ways to help those students who struggled with the change.

Second, teachers’ unions became **political roadblocks** in many states, not only encouraging state legislators to block access to alternative programs like virtual charter schools, but actively preventing teachers from doing the best they could to keep up virtually with their students until teaching contracts could be wholly renegotiated.

One shocking account from two teachers **reads**:

*“Throughout the coronavirus quarantine, teachers’ priorities have been keeping their students on track and creating innovative ways to learn, but the union has focused on warning teachers against straying one inch from their contracts, including initial bans on e-learning.*

*This isn’t just a complication caused by regulations. That might be understandable. Unions were wary of remote learning from the start because they feared families might like it and switch to cyber charter schools. They’ve said as much in their emails to teachers, as if we would share their fear of families making their own educational choices.*

*We both left our teachers’ union because of issues like this. The intimidating emails sent during stay-at-home are nothing new to us, although employees in any other profession would be shocked to receive them: ‘Do not try to teach any new material or post any videos on the online portal. We know who you are. We’ll find out, and you will hear from us.’”*

Finally, while many education technology companies quickly made their products available for discounted or waived fees, and charter schools that have always operated online offered training sessions, hostility between the different education sectors and red tape prevented many districts from taking advantage of most of these offers.

## **Frustrations with Distance Learning**

Schools have an obligation to provide distance learning options during this time, but that doesn’t mean that online instruction is a great fit for every child. Frustrations with worksheets, attendance requirements, student motivation, and curricula have been common for the past

few months. This may be partly a reflection on schools' slow and uneven rollout of virtual school, but it also could be an indication that parents are not pleased with the teaching material they've suddenly been thrust into the position of reviewing.

It's actually more difficult than many would expect for parents to get their hands on curricula, lesson plans, and teaching materials during normal times. Many districts restrict review to certain times of the day or dates of the month, and others simply don't keep reviewable records of textbooks or syllabi. That secrecy has been completely blown away since schools closed in March, with every lesson happening more or less in families' living rooms.

Some parents might be displeased with the content of lessons, particularly on what now are often regrettably culturally-sensitive topics like American history, sexual education, and biology. Others might simply be disappointed with the pace of learning for their children, or getting their first taste of confusing Common Core math worksheets.

Polling shows that 40 percent of families are more likely to consider homeschooling in the immediate future, especially if COVID precautions and health worries make the coming school year more stressful than appealing.

While these sea-change level figures are unlikely to materialize long-term, it will be a positive cultural development if this time spurs families and schools to remember that parents are ultimately in charge of what and how their children learn. Re-centering parents, rather than administrators, legislators, education "experts," or even teachers as the primary directors of their children's educations, could pay dividends for decades to come.

It's important for sometimes-frazzled parents to remember that whether or not their students stay on track for standardized testing this semester, children *are* learning at home during this time. Learning at home does not have to resemble regular school; kids are absorbing lessons and life skills from watching the news, participating in household chores like cooking, watching documentaries or historical movies, reading novels, and just spending quality time with their parents. This semester may very well be the one when many kids learn some of the most important and memorable lessons of their lives.

If families are dissatisfied with what's being provided by the district during this time for any reason, states should be offering school choice options that better suit their needs. Individually, families may want to consider at least temporarily formally withdrawing their children from public school for the upcoming school year. In most states, this is a **relatively** easy process. Importantly, the "school at home" experience of many families differs from true homeschooling in important ways—in many ways it is easier to simply homeschool, especially absent a pandemic, because parents determine the curriculum and can make use of local resources like libraries and museums or join together with other homeschooling families in co-ops or learning groups.

However, if a greater number of children are going to be schooled at home for the foreseeable future due to ongoing public health worries, many families may prefer to be in charge of the curriculum, pace, and activities themselves, replacing screen time with assigning classic novels, for example.

## Schools as Social Service Delivery

While not even one in two districts were offering real virtual learning by the end of the 2019-20 school year, schools have done a much faster and better job restoring the social services they offer. Fully 82 percent of districts were providing meals to students even back in March, while by May, nearly all (95 percent) were doing so. While the quick action of districts with regard to services is laudable, it brings up questions about the primary purpose of public schooling. Similarly, governors around the country have noted that it's difficult to restart the economy without the childcare schools normally provide for dual-income or single-parent households. Again, schools seem to be playing not so much an educational role, but one in distributing social services such as childcare.

The COVID crisis has placed into stark relief the fact that the nation's schools are serving principally social and childcare functions for Americans, and that education itself is no longer the primary purpose of the public system. Many cancelled events and summer camps are offering refunds to planned attendees. If parents, not schools, are shouldering the real educational and instructional burdens for learning, particularly during this crisis, they should receive the funds taxpayers allocate for that purpose to districts.

## School Choice in a Pandemic

States should be looking to offer families flexibility during this time, as parents make tradeoffs about work, responsibilities, and learning. One way to provide that flexibility is through school choice programs.

School choice is an umbrella term that encompasses private options such as direct scholarships for students to attend private schools, tax breaks for those who donate to scholarship-granting organizations, and fully-flexible options like education savings accounts, which place parents fully in charge of a child's education funds. Other school choice options include charter schools, whether virtual or (in non-COVID times) brick-and-mortar, and homeschooling.

Expanding school choice options in ways that make sense for the current moment, such as eliminating now-outdated income eligibility requirements and allowing for mid-year enrollment changes, makes sense for both families and states. For families, school choice programs can provide extra funds to cover "accidental homeschooling" expenses, as well as allow parents to choose between multiple virtual learning options, including at schools that are used to delivering distance learning in normal times, such as virtual charter schools.

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Making liberal use of choice programs also makes sense for what are almost certain to be cash-strapped state legislatures in the coming year. Nearly everyone is going to have to figure out how to do more with less, and virtually every state school choice program educates students at a fraction of the cost of traditional public schools, some at close to a third of the cost.

And these programs provide more cost-effective educational opportunities without sacrificing academic achievement or social value. Eleven out of 17 studies on private school choice programs find academic improvement among students, while nearly every study on public schools in the same geographic area shows improvement among the students “left” in traditional public schools as a result of the program. More importantly, school choice programs have demonstrated the ability to change student life outcomes radically, from higher graduation rates to lower criminal convictions.

With better student outcomes and lower costs to the taxpayer, school choice programs would seem like a no-brainer for these challenging times, but unfortunately, entrenched interests in some states have already **moved** to prevent families from taking advantage of even already-existing programs during this time. For example, in Pennsylvania, responding to lobbying from teachers’ unions, the legislature capped funds to virtual charter schools that were experiencing large increases in student enrollment, leaving the schools to teach many more students without any additional reimbursement from the state.

## Private Schools

While many think of high-tuition prep schools like Sidwell Friends (where many members of Congress send their children in D.C.) when they think of private schools, this image is **misleading**. The typical private school actually charges considerably less than the average per-pupil funding at a public school, with 60 percent of private schools charging less than \$6,000 in annual tuition. These numbers are heavily influenced by Catholic school networks, which educate close to half of private school students, and as recently as 2018 were asking parents for under \$5,000 a year for K-8 tuition, on average. Other parochial schools also often see it as part of their mission to keep tuition prices low and their doors open to all comers.

Unfortunately, the coronavirus crisis has heavily impacted exactly those schools that strive to keep tuition low for families and accept many students on scholarship. While public schools will face sharp budget cuts in the coming year, recessions in the past have forced contractions in the private school sector, with families on the margin unable to keep up with even modest tuition and school closures following enrollment drops. The Catholic Archbishop of New York is already **warning** of a potential collapse in the Catholic school network there, and 44 private schools of various affiliations have already shut their doors. The students from these already-closed schools alone **represent** \$96 million in district costs if they return to the public system.

If this continues, the cost to already cash-strapped states will be enormous. If just ten percent of private school students enroll in traditional public schools, the cost to states would be an additional \$6.7 billion a year, and the **estimates** only increase from there.

Furthermore, it’s not just dollars and cents that are at stake. The United States is an outlier among its European allies in having a robust, independent, truly diverse private school system. In France, for example, while private schools exist, they either constantly operate on the margins of financial solvency, or accept a “contract” from the state—which comes with a state curriculum and inspections. America’s private schools, by contrast, offer as part of their *raison d’être* genuinely different approaches to education, including enforcing particular religious

traditions, dissimilar curricula or campus culture from public schools, and/or experimenting with alternative learning styles. It is what makes private schools different from public options that makes them such an important part of the American education landscape.

Private schools provide critical support for families, students, and the whole communities they serve. To use just one eye-opening illustration, an open Catholic school within a police beat is statistically associated with a 33 percent drop in crime for the neighborhood. Studies on the private school choice program in Milwaukee show enormous drops in felony convictions, drug convictions, and paternity disputes among young adult graduates when compared to counterparts who attended public school. The community as a whole benefits from the presence of a healthy private school sector.

Protecting our private schools, along with state school choice programs that offer the opportunity to attend them, should be a high priority as we scramble our way out of the hole caused by the pandemic and shutdowns. While private schools were eligible for the Paycheck Protection Program, they are unaccustomed to taking government funds, and many didn't have the know-how or legal resources to apply quickly. Governors should ensure—and members of Congress should write into any bailout bills—that some federal funds be used to help keep private school doors open. Critically, all levels of government, from federal to local, should make sure that those funds do not come with any **strings** that hamper the unique character of private schools. As noted above, the financial fates of public and private schools are more intertwined than public school administrators often think. It is to everyone's benefit, for reasons both financial and cultural, to keep as many private schools afloat as possible as we emerge from shutdowns.

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## Policy Recommendations

**Flexibility and Choice**—Families, teachers, and students all need flexibility during this challenging time, and policy decisions should be aimed at providing it.

- States with private school choice programs (particularly education savings accounts which offer maximum flexibility and funds for tutoring, curricula, materials, educational therapy, and more) should look to allow mid-year enrollment and expand eligibility.
- Additionally, they should ensure that any income caps used reflect families' post-COVID financial situations.
- States without those programs should consider creating them for the many families in need, and whose districts are not living up to their obligations in terms of delivering distance learning.
- On the federal level, expanding the usage of 529 accounts to homeschooling supplies would allow families to tap them for this “emergency homeschooling” moment.

**Expand, Don't Hamper, Virtual Options**—Some schools are already prepared to offer full instruction online and have been doing so for years.

- Virtual charter schools and state virtual public schools know how to deliver distance learning.
- States should not arbitrarily foreclose this option for families by capping enrollment or funding at the behest of unions.

**Learning at Home Doesn't Have to Look the Same**—Families frustrated with worksheets and YouTube videos, or disillusioned with unpalatable plans for fall reopening, should consider formally declaring as homeschoolers, even temporarily.

- Most states make it fairly easy to do so, and withdrawing your children from school will allow families to set curricula and goals without the interference of the district school.
- For example, some parents may prefer to replace worksheets and reading passages with book reports on classic novels.

**Local Reopening Plans**—Infection rates and danger to high-risk teaching staff look different state by state, district by district, and even school by school.

- Reopening plans for fall should reflect that reality, and decisions about what precautions to take should be made as close to the school level as possible.
- Continued distance learning should be available into the fall for families that prefer it.

**Preparation and Accountability**—Schools should be better prepared for distance learning if they have to do it again in September.

- They have had months to get online instruction right, and they have forewarning about a potential second wave of infections in the fall.
- If districts are not delivering real instruction virtually, states need to make the funds for educating children available to their parents, who are doing the job that schools are normally paid to do.

**Good Spending Decisions with Smaller Budgets**—Contrary to common opinion, public education in the United States has seen increasing funding for decade after decade.

- We spend an average of more than \$16,000 per student annually: more than **double** the inflation-adjusted per-pupil amount we spent in 1970.
- School districts, like American businesses and households, will have to tighten their belts next year. They should finally end the bureaucratic **staffing boom** that's been going on for decades, and allocate funds instead toward teacher salaries and classroom expenses.

**Schools are for Education**—We must restore education as the primary purpose of public schools.

- While social services are important, we have sadly allowed them to overtake what should be the main mission of schools: educating students. Of course, educators (and everyone) understand that children cannot learn when their basic needs are not met, but we should question whether schools are the best vehicle for delivering social assistance.
- States should look at ways to decouple non-educational services, such as free meals, from education, and re-assert that the primary purpose of public education cannot be merely as a stand-in for childcare.
- Federal funding programs should allow states the ability to innovate in this matter.



# What You Can Do

## Get Informed

Learn More:

- Financial Crisis Looming for K12 Schools? Flexibility Needed, Not Bailouts ([The Heritage Foundation](#)).
- A Blueprint for Back to School ([American Enterprise Institute](#)).
- Back to the Staffing Surge ([EdChoice](#)).

## Talk to Your Friends

Help your friends and family understand these important issues. Tell them about what's going on and encourage them to join you in getting involved.

## Become a Leader in the Community

Get a group together each month to talk about a political/policy issue (it will be fun!). Write a letter to the editor. Show up at local government meetings and make your opinions known. Go to rallies. Better yet, organize rallies! A few motivated people can change the world.

## Remain Engaged Politically

Too many good citizens see election time as the only time they need to pay attention to politics. We need everyone to pay attention and hold elected officials accountable. Let your Representatives know your opinions. After all, they are supposed to work for you!

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### ABOUT INDEPENDENT WOMEN'S FORUM

Independent Women's Forum (IWF) is dedicated to building support for free markets, limited government, and individual responsibility.

IWF, a non-partisan, 501(c)(3) research and educational institution, seeks to combat the too-common presumption that women want and benefit from big government, and build awareness of the ways that women are better served by greater economic freedom. By aggressively seeking earned media, providing easy-to-read, timely publications and commentary, and reaching out to the public, we seek to cultivate support for these important principles and encourage women to join us in working to return the country to limited, Constitutional government.

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