

# POLICY *focus*

RECIPES FOR RATIONAL GOVERNMENT

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## Parents Taking Control of Children's Education

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### What You Should Know

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The coronavirus pandemic utterly disrupted the lives and education of the nation's 50 million public school students. Most schools in the United States closed in March 2020, and many public schools did not open fully for the majority of the 2020-21 school year. There are doubts that schools will open fully this fall, particularly in areas **heavily influenced by teachers' unions**. The pandemic **opened parents' eyes** to just how unresponsive and inflexible school districts are to their children's needs.

As the country emerges from the pandemic, parents are engaging in school board meetings, running for school board, and demanding accountability from the local leaders more than ever before.

Many parents dissatisfied with inadequate remote learning, frustrated with hybrid learning schedules, and concerned about learning loss are seeking alternative educational options. Public school enrollment decreased by 3 percent during the last school year, and likely will decrease further. **Homeschooling rates doubled to over 11 percent** of the total school-aged population. Families in areas with perpetually closed public schools, but fully open private schools, eagerly transferred their children. Fortunately, state legislators recognized the soaring demand for educational options, and expanded or created new school choice programs in 20 states in 2021.

This is positive progress, but doesn't go far enough. All families should have the power to direct their children's educational path. Parents should demand reforms to give them more and better options, and they should continue to expand efforts to hold school boards accountable.

## Why You Should Care

Many public school districts provided inadequate remote learning and minimal in-person instruction during the COVID pandemic, depriving students of the educational experience that they deserved. Families filled in the instructional gaps by homeschooling, hiring tutors, forming learning pods or enrolling their children in open private schools, primarily at their own expense. Parents and policymakers should ensure that the nation's education system becomes more responsive to the needs of students by focusing on:

- **Minimizing the influence of the teachers' unions:** Unions do not work on behalf of families and students. Unions strive to expand their political power, raise funds, and control working conditions. They do not aim to improve education.
- **Fully engaging in local school board elections:** Schools boards should be responsive to the needs of their communities. School board elections directly impact the education provided to children, but voter turnout typically is extremely low and **union-backed candidates often win.**
- **Expanding educational options:** Twenty states created or expanded school choice programs in 2021. School choice policies empower parents, rather than school board officials or district bureaucrats, to direct their children's education. These should be expanded everywhere so that all families have leverage and control of their children's education..

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## More Information

### Pandemic School Closures

The early days of the COVID pandemic resulted in an almost-total shutdown of elementary and secondary schools in the United States. Most private schools opened their doors to students by the start of the 2020-21 school year. States like Florida and Iowa, in response to clear gubernatorial guidance, provided the option for students to return to public school classrooms in the fall of 2020. Many states and school districts, however, kept students learning remotely. In stark contrast, most **private schools opened** their doors in the fall.

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As COVID cases abated and vaccination rates increased throughout the school year, more schools slowly opened their doors, often with a hybrid combination of remote and in-person days. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) strongly recommended districts strive to meet, “[the] goal of having students physically present in school.” The quality and quantity of remote instruction varied, but was often an inadequate substitute for in-person education. The U.S. Department of Education's **2021 Student Survey** found that some students received only two hours or less of online instruction during remote school days. Given the consensus that remote learning resulted in lower test scores, higher student disengagement, and soaring mental and physical health issues, the country needed to fully commit to opening schools.

Even when the 2020-21 school year concluded, however, only **54 percent of school districts** were offering fully in-person instruction. Less than half of the nation's public school students were attending classes fully in-person. Smaller districts were more likely to fully open than larger districts, and **districts in states led by Democrats** were more likely to stay closed or open on a limited basis. By the end of the school year, 45 percent of the nation's school districts offered a hybrid instruction option, which often meant two days of in-person school with reduced instructional hours and one day with no instruction, resulting in students receiving only 10 hours of in-person instruction per week. Many students eager to return to school after lengthy, isolating closures, returned to classrooms without teachers in place, and instruction still only happening through a screen. Inexplicably, some districts refused to offer any in-person instruction for the entire school year.

## Ongoing School Performance Concerns

Families often choose their housing and community based on the reputations of local public schools, and many felt confident their children attended “good schools” prior to COVID. The unfortunate truth, however, is that many schools were not serving children well even before the pandemic. The **National Assessment of Educational Program (NAEP)** assesses a representative sample of U.S. students in certain subjects in key grades. Prior to catastrophic lengthy school closures, only **11 percent** of public school twelfth graders met proficiency standards in U.S. history, only 24 percent met math standards and 36 percent were considered proficient in reading. Minority students in chaotic urban districts were learning the least. In **Detroit**, even before the pandemic closures, only six percent of fourth graders met math proficiency benchmarks, and seven percent met reading standards.

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Parents of students with special needs have long struggled to ensure their child receives an “adequate” education in district schools, even if services and accommodations are detailed in an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). The abandonment of **special education students** during the school closures exacerbated an ongoing challenge: many special needs students were poorly served and absolutely miserable at schools that were unwilling or unable to meet their needs. A Virginia public school teacher described the situation, “Unfortunately having an IEP was little help this past year, as hundreds of (parents) either gave up on collecting their services due or they simply paid for them privately.”

## Powerful Teachers' Unions

There is a definitive culprit in the school closure debacle: teachers' unions. Unions kept schools closed, reduced hours of instruction, and created “**Zoom-in-a-room**” classes, with students in classrooms, but educators still providing instruction from their homes. The national teachers' unions, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA), engaged in numerous campaigns designed to scare their members' communities, politicians and school leaders into closing schools and severely limiting instructional hours. Union roadblocks appeared at the outset of the COVID school closures, with some local teachers' unions **instructing teachers** to not teach new material.

In the summer of 2020, unions encouraged members to send fake body bags, coffins and obituaries to governors and local leaders, and filled social media with threats that teachers and students would certainly die if schools opened. The resistance to returning teachers to classrooms continued into 2021, with union leaders convincing the **Centers for Disease Control (CDC)** to draft restrictive reopening guidance. In addition to asserting absolute control over school opening and instructional hours, the unions wanted more federal funding. Their efforts resulted in a staggering commitment of emergency federal funding – \$190 billion in additional federal funding for elementary and secondary education over three federal stimulus bills. Union efforts also resulted in a disastrous year for many students across the country, and a difficult year for parents – often mothers – overseeing their children’s remote learning experience or juggling confusing hybrid learning schedules.

## Public Backlash to Union Malfeasance

Vaccination availability, decreasing COVID caseloads, and studies revealing extremely low COVID transmission in schools ensured a safe working environment for teachers as the school year continued, but teachers’ unions continued to insist that schools remain fully closed or only minimally open in many areas. Unfortunately, they did not insist on improvements to the quality of remote instruction inflicted upon students. As a result, course failure rates skyrocketed, state testing failures increased significantly, students with disabilities’ scores and skills deteriorated, and high school dropout rates soared.

As the pandemic persisted, parents increasingly recognized that union leaders do not advocate for their children and communities. Union leaders’ determination to keep schools closed often didn’t reflect the values of individual teachers, who were eager to return to their classrooms. Parents formed Open Schools groups in communities around the country, in order to ensure that unions did not drown out the voices of parents and students. Parents held press conferences, spoke to the media, wrote letters to the editor, published opinion editorials in their local newspapers, and launched social media campaigns. Polling trends and **media coverage** reflected the rise of parent advocacy and the decline of union influence on the public’s views on school closures.

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## Weak School Board Oversight of Remote Learning

Online learning offered by established providers, such as the Florida Virtual School, can be a good fit for some students, including children who have been bullied or experienced sensory processing challenges in noisy classrooms. Online learning can benefit students by offering access to advanced courses that local districts, due to staffing issues, cannot provide.

Public school implementation of remote learning, however, largely neglected to learn from successful online models. School districts insufficiently addressed technology and connectivity challenges, provided students with difficult-to-access learning portals, neglected to train teachers, overly depended on videos and low-quality “educational” games, and required parents to serve as “Zoom butlers” to ensure students were truly logged on and completing online tasks.

Many local district school boards, the officials elected to provide school district oversight, did not demand that district staff address remote learning deficiencies, even when parents pleaded for higher quality remote learning or school re-openings. Many school board members did not question their school district bureaucrats' ineffective remote learning, the declining test scores and increasing failure rates, or bureaucrats' decision to keep schools closed long after the COVID risk abated. **Teachers' unions** often play a large role in the election of school board members, which are mostly held in "off-cycle" years and result in extremely low voter turnout. Throughout the 2020-21 school year, unions discouraged or actively prevented expanded instructional hours, leaving students with "asynchronous" days (essentially a day off from school) and minimal in-person instruction, and union-supported school board members enabled these policies to continue to the detriment of students. Many school boards ignored parents' pleas to properly, or at a minimum adequately, educate their children, and complied with the demands of teachers' unions instead.

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## Growth of Parent Advocacy

Arlington Parents for Education, a group of parents in Arlington, Virginia, that advocated for open schools, was one of many Open Schools groups around the country that exposed weak school board leadership through compelling **social media campaigns**. Arlington parents were outraged that the district had shortened elementary school days by 20 percent, provided instruction on iPads even when children finally returned to schools, provided no recovery services, and reneged on summer school promises. The parents asserted that the school district "continues to ignore mounting risks to our kids like negative mental health impacts, learning loss & widening equity gaps. Students bear the lowest risk of the disease but time after time have borne the greatest burden of measures because (the district) doesn't align with the science." Arlington parents felt abandoned by their community leaders. The school district and school board, "failed our community this year. Our Board Members gave a collective shrug & the Arlington County Board passed the buck. Our public schools exist to educate children, not to solely employ adults. All of our so-called leaders forgot this."

Here are examples of **Arlington Parents for Education tweets**:

- Snack time, abolished. Carefree & joyful recess, no more. Stay ten feet apart. Masks on outside despite heat. Bring a toy or ball - but no one else may play with it. Forgot your water? Too bad. Water fountains are closed.
- Reading assessments showed an **8% decline**, 77%-118% more middle schoolers & 35% more high schoolers **failing at least one class**. Fewer ELL & students of color met reading benchmarks.
- During spring 2020 closures, APS said, "don't worry, we don't teach your kids much during the 4th quarter anyway." This was meant to be reassuring but it was revealing of the low expectations we now know APS has for our kids. When someone tells you who they are, listen.

- We heard that transportation was the main reason we couldn't get more in-person days or normal length, but a district 10x our size was able to figure it out for 4 days.
- In April families were told that any student who qualified for Summer School would receive it: kids w IEPs, kids learning English, young learners who made no progress this year. In May @APSVirginia broke their promise: they wouldn't be able to staff summer school after all.

Parents frustrated by poor pandemic leadership, as well as ongoing mask mandates and curriculum concerns, increasingly began to take action as the school closures continued. They regularly spoke at school board meetings and formed local parent advocacy organizations. Parents started forcing the resignations of their district superintendents, choosing to run for school board, creating political action committees to fund school board candidate campaigns, and taking steps to recall members of their existing school board. **Ballotpedia** reported a significant increase in school board recalls this year with 57 recall campaigns targeting 143 school board members by August 2021, already much higher than the average of 23 recall efforts against 52 school board members of previous years.

## School Choice Policy Victories and Recommendations

Parents understandably pursued alternative educational options during the pandemic. Public school enrollment decreased overall by 3 percent during the 2020-21 school year. **Homeschooling rates** doubled to over 11 percent of the total school-aged population, up from 5.4 percent prior to the pandemic-inspired school closures. Families in areas with perpetually closed public schools, but fully open **private schools**, eagerly transferred their children. **Private schools surveyed in November 2020** reported being fully open (76%) or open on a hybrid schedule (24%), with 70 percent reporting enrollment that had increased or remained the same, in contrast to similar economic downturns in the past leading to significant drops in private enrollment.

**Support for school choice increased significantly** during the pandemic school closures. Almost three-quarters of registered voters support school choice: 74 percent, up from 64 percent in early 2020. Support is strong across party lines, with 83 percent of Republicans, 69 percent of Independents, and 70 percent of Democrats supportive. Remarkably, 80 percent of public school parents now support school choice, up from 68 percent before the pandemic. Fortunately, lawmakers heard parents' frustration with unresponsive and inflexible school districts, and responded to their desire for school choice.

Going into the pandemic, private school choice programs existed in 26 states and Washington, D.C., and 45 states and Washington, D.C. had charter schools. During the 2021 legislative sessions, policymakers in **20 states** passed education laws that expanded existing private school choice options or enacted new programs, including new state education savings account (ESA) programs

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in Kentucky, West Virginia, New Hampshire, Indiana and Missouri. ESAs, previously serving students in five states and now in ten, allow families to use education funds deposited by the state into an account for qualified children for a wide range of educational purposes, including curricula, online learning programs, tutoring, educational therapies, and tuition and fees. These new and expanded school choice programs directly serve students and families, rather than empowering district bureaucrats and teachers' unions. By linking financial consequences for a school with family satisfaction, school choice also grants families the leverage they need to make sure that their students' needs are being prioritized by public school districts.

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States, local communities and school districts can continue to expand educational opportunities for students by directing a portion of the COVID-response supplemental federal education funding to student-centered policies. With an average of \$3,800 per pupil available, and high-poverty areas receiving significantly higher amounts, directing the funds to students could have a significant impact. The **State Policy Network (SPN) developed a toolkit** of student-centered policy options to consider, and **additional student-focused policy ideas** abound. SPN recommends that state and local leaders use federal funds to provide **Supplemental Education Scholarship Accounts (ESAs)** to families. ESA options include:

- **Personal Learning Loss Grants** for struggling students to use for tutoring or other learning loss interventions.
- **Personal Special Education Grants** for students with disabilities. Parents could choose their child's special education services and supports, including services not provided during school closures.
- **Educational Enrichment Grants** for students from low-income families to access educational enrichment opportunities, including those offered by private providers.
- **Trauma Recovery Grants** for students to access mental health services from the provider that best meets the student's needs.
- **Personal Education Pathway Grants** for secondary students to access dual enrollment, apprenticeship, or job training programs.

## Conclusion

During the summer of 2021, teachers' union leaders repeatedly expressed concern about the spread of the Delta variant of COVID, foreshadowing potential school closure battles during the upcoming school year. Fortunately, many parents have found their voice, embraced their role as the primary educator of their child, learned how to engage their school board, and thoroughly researched their educational options. Parents should hold school districts accountable for their management of schools during and after the pandemic, and replace irresponsible board members with student-focused community members. Parents and state legislators should continue to advocate for expansions of school choice policies, and engage their community members in the fight for change.

# What You Can Do

## Get Informed

Learn more about Taking Control of Your Child's Education. Visit:

- **Running for School Board: A Starter Guide**
- **A Family's Guide to Grassroots Activism** — Every child deserves access to a quality education. This is your guide to achieving it.
- **National School Choice Week — School Choice by State**

## 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!

## CONNECT WITH IWF! FOLLOW US ON:

### 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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