

POLICY FOCUS

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Transparency in Residentially-Assigned Schools

By Ginny Gentles, Director of the Education Freedom Center

HIGHLIGHT

Schools should welcome parental involvement and be transparent about their curriculum and everything that happens in their schools. Parents living in school districts that treat them as a nuisance—or worse, an enemy—want education options that provide transparency. To restore trust and entice families to enroll in district schools, school administrators should establish a transparent culture that truly partners with parents.

INTRODUCTION

Parents resent being viewed as an annoyance by school administrators, school district officials, and teachers. School leaders often claim to be “partners” with parents, but implement policies that keep parents in the dark. In too many districts across the country, education bureaucrats deny parents’ requests to view curriculum and learning materials or charge exorbitant prices to see requested materials, effectively blocking parents’ access. In some areas, school districts are violating federal law by [denying parents](#) the opportunity to exempt their

children from intrusive and inappropriate surveys. Most alarmingly, schools are using parent-exclusion policies to **hide** children's emotional distress and desired "gender transitions" from parents. As a result of this culture of secrecy and deceit, many parents **no longer trust** their children's public schools and are **seeking** alternative options.

Trust is broken, but a true school-parent partnership could flourish if education leaders commit to a transparent culture. School districts should implement transparency policies that grant parents access to budget plans and academic materials, clearly inform parents of their rights, and commit to not keeping secrets from parents.

BACKGROUND

Districts will face challenges in the upcoming school year as they contend with labor disruptions and budget issues in addition to pervasive discipline problems, chronic absenteeism, alarming learning loss, and other impacts of the ongoing misplaced priorities of our education system.

Parents know that schools across the country, and in their neighborhoods, have problems, but often lack important details and context. As we move into a year when many school districts will finally make long-postponed tough budget decisions, parents are likely to hear from the media about "budget cuts" and teacher layoffs. Rather than relying on the media narrative, parents should have access to the data and information themselves. Parents deserve to know how school districts allocate their resources and what's happening in the schools so that they can make reasoned choices about their children's education.

SELF-INFLICTED CHALLENGES

Budget Transparency and Declining Enrollment
Demographic shifts are driving a steep drop in school-aged children, with annual **birth rates declining** since 2008. Elementary and secondary schools are facing an **enrollment cliff**, but few districts have taken action to adjust their budgets in response. Additionally, teachers unions have negotiated expensive collective agreements that school districts cannot afford, especially now that the temporary **\$190 billion budget cushion**, provided by the federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER) to help schools during the COVID pandemic, is winding down. In response to sharp enrollment declines and budget challenges, more districts likely will begin considering closing **under-capacity schools** and reducing **historically high staffing levels**.

Parents are often kept in the dark about district enrollment projections and budgeting plans, and the lack of fiscal transparency obscures the true causes of districts' financial challenges. Teachers unions and union-controlled politicians **blame** "vouchers" for districts' self-inflicted budget woes. But the public system's enrollment decline has accelerated due to parents leaving their residentially-assigned public schools for alternative options even in **areas** without state-funded education freedom programs. And "vouchers" did not force districts to ignore declining birth rates during their budgeting process and to hire *permanent staff with temporary federal ESSER funding*. Central office bureaucrats are responsible for crafting imprudent budgets.

Districts have been compounding their budget woes for years by hiring **well-compensated**

administrators at a rapid pace, committing to expensive **education technology** and **consulting** contracts, **wasting** federal ESSER funds, and otherwise irresponsibly spending taxpayer dollars.

To reduce enrollment declines, districts can entice families to enroll in residentially-assigned schools by transparently addressing parents' budget concerns and tackling the problems listed below by implementing policies that increase transparency.

Academic Transparency and COVID-Era Culture

Parents received a glimpse behind the K-12 curtain while serving as their children's remote learning "Zoom butlers" during COVID-era school closures. As they watched

when schools finally opened again. In school board meetings, op-eds, and online parent groups, parents called for increased academic transparency. Their frustration grew as their expressions of concern were dismissed and, in too many places, met with hostility.

As IWF President Carrie Lukas **wrote** in 2021, "I don't trust Virginia public schools anymore. I don't trust that my local school board will prioritize students' needs over the desires of union workers. I don't trust that they share my values and seek to teach my kids facts and skills, rather than to indoctrinate them into a specific and extreme political view. I don't trust that they really prioritize student safety and well-being; and I especially do not trust that they are honest and transparent with parents."

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"online learning" unfold over their children's shoulders, they realized schools were not teaching their children basic knowledge and skills. They discovered school materials steeped in environmental alarmism, race essentialism, and radical doctrines. Parents who assumed their neighborhood schools prioritized academics and pathways to success discovered lessons focused on ideology and victimhood. Parents also realized their child's "straight A's" did not equate to strong reading and math proficiency.

As their children became more disengaged from learning and fell further behind the longer schools remained closed, parents wondered how schools would accelerate learning and catch children up to grade level

Hostility to Parents' Questions

When schools opened up again, parents who approached school districts with requests for information about lessons, books, and materials were charged **huge fees** or received outright rejections of their requests. The brief taste of transparency provided by remote learning inspired parents to ask more questions, but schools did not want to answer them.

Intrusive Surveys

School districts regularly subject students to intrusive surveys and questionnaires that ask young students about their sexual habits, drug and alcohol use, sexual and gender identities, mental health, suicide plans, dating experiences, and family life. Many

districts either ignore **federal** and state laws that require parents to be notified about surveys and allowed to **opt out**, or they are unaware of their **legal responsibilities**. The surveys are crafted by both **private entities** and government agencies, with states often submitting students' information to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's **Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System** (YRBSS).

State youth surveys ask deeply personal questions that normalize unhealthy behavior, which could be confusing and destabilizing for participating students. In **Minnesota**, for example, questions can include: "In the last 12 months, how many times have you run away from home? Beat up someone? Stolen something? Purposely tried to hurt or injure yourself? Sniffed glue? Used LSD? Heroin? Spent the day drinking alcohol? Used un-prescribed tranquilizers or pain meds? How old were you when you first tried marijuana? Have you had sexual intercourse? With how many sexual partners of the same sex? Different sex? How many times have you been pregnant or gotten someone pregnant?"

Such questions encourage kids to think that such behaviors are routine, even expected, parts of adolescence. At a minimum, parents should be aware of the contents of these surveys and have the opportunity to opt their children out.

Deceiving Parents

Schools in over **1,000 school districts** nationwide are crafting **Gender Support Plans** as soon as a child expresses interest in a new gender identity, name, and pronouns. The child determines if the school will keep the plan and the student's new identity a secret from his or her parents.

Social transitions are not neutral acts. Without parents' knowledge or consent, school staff are pushing **highly sensitive students**—regardless of their **struggles** with depression, anxiety, or obsessive rumination—down a one-way path to harmful **medical transition**, which includes puberty blockers, surgery, potential sterilization, permanent loss of sexual function, and high-risk cross-sex hormone injections. While other nations are **protecting** children from what activists and the Biden administration misleadingly call "gender-affirming care," American school districts are continuing to encourage gender-confused children to become lifelong medical patients. Gender support plans are the first step along a **dangerous path**, and parents should not be kept in the dark when a school district employee encourages their child to socially and medically transition.

SOLUTIONS

Transparency in our public K-12 schools is simply common sense. The default should be that parents and taxpayers have access to all information about how their school system is run and what they are teaching kids. Yet fully embracing a transparency culture would be a watershed shift in our education system and a first step to re-orienting our public schools to putting students' best interests first.

Academic Transparency

At a minimum, states should implement laws that make it clear that parents of school-aged children have the right to review public schools' instructional materials. Academic transparency laws should include mechanisms that facilitate access to the materials, including requiring schools to **post comprehensive lists** of the materials used for every grade and subject on their websites.

Requiring parents to travel to the school districts in order to review materials within a narrow window of time is unacceptable as it limits working parents' access. Charging exorbitant fees intentionally prevents parents from being able to afford to review materials and lessons. Parents should be able to access and review materials before the school year begins so they can make informed decisions about whether their residentially-assigned school is the best fit for their child.

Notify Parents of Federal Rights

In response to parents' demands for transparency, [20 states](#) have parental rights provisions in law or state policy, and [15 states](#) have specific academic transparency protections in place. As state-level transparency efforts expand, states should consider making participation in intrusive student surveys "opt-in," rather than "opt-out." Or, states can follow the lead of states like Louisiana and [Florida](#) and stop participating in CDC surveys altogether.

State legislative efforts are important, but school districts should also be required to remind parents of their long-standing federal rights regularly and clearly. Two federal laws support parents' access to information about their children's educational experiences and records: PPRA and FERPA.

Parents have the right under the federal [Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment \(PPRA\)](#) to opt their students out of surveys. The PPRA gives parents the right to consent before students are required to submit to a survey that asks questions about "protected areas" (e.g., political affiliations or beliefs; mental or psychological problems; sex behavior; religious practices). Under the PPRA, the school district must notify parents

about upcoming surveys, including the dates surveys will take place.

The [Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act \(FERPA\)](#) gives parents of minor students the right to inspect and review their children's education records. If the school does not amend information in the child's record that parents identify as inaccurate or misleading (e.g., new name and pronouns), the parent has the right to a formal hearing.

The federal government and state education agencies should ensure that school districts are informing parents of their PPRA and FERPA rights. If school districts are regularly misleading parents about their federal rights, parents should file a [complaint](#) with the U.S. Department of Education. Policymakers should consider giving parents the opportunity to sue the district.

End Parent Exclusion Policies

To help restore parents' trust in public schools, districts should immediately end the practice of crafting secretive Gender Support Plans when a child expresses curiosity or interest in adopting a new gender identity. To ensure that districts are not keeping secrets from parents, states should introduce a version of the [Given Name Act](#), which requires public education employees to receive written permission from a student's parents or guardians before addressing a student by a name other than the name listed on a student's birth certificate (or diminutive nickname) or using a pronoun in addressing a student that differs from that student's biological sex. [Eight states](#) have passed a version of the Given Name Act, and others, including [Virginia](#), have policies in place encouraging districts to seek parental consent before changing a child's name and pronouns.

Provide Education Freedom Options

IWF's Education Freedom Center envisions a system in which all families have the capacity to choose a school or educational experience that is best suited for their children. Greater transparency about residentially-assigned public schools—the only option for too many families—is an important step to improving public school quality as well as increasing demand for additional options.

States should create an eligibility category for the state's [education freedom](#) program(s) (if

requires state and district report cards to report on per-pupil expenditures down to the school level. This information must be posted and shared in a way that is easily accessible and easy to understand for parents. Districts should communicate their budget plans clearly to parents and community members, and provide sufficient time for stakeholder input.

Administrators should have nothing to hide in how they are spending taxpayer dollars. School districts that use resources prudently will keep the support of the public and parents.

Parents have the right to know what their children are learning, and schools have the responsibility to provide that information. States should implement policies that restore parental trust in schools and require full transparency.

one exists) for families living in school districts that defy federal and state transparency policies. Students residing in transparency-denying districts could be made eligible for a state-funded [Education Savings Account \(ESA\)](#), [tax credit](#), or [scholarship](#) program. If, for example, a Virginia district is caught charging parents exorbitant fees to review lessons and learning materials, all families in the district would become eligible for the state's [tax credit scholarship program](#), which is currently limited to lower-income families. Introducing this accountability measure would also inspire districts to comply with laws that require parents to be notified about student surveys and to be kept informed about their child's mental health and social transition plans.

Share Education Spending Information

The federal law governing K-12 public education policy, currently known as the [Every Student Succeeds Act \(ESSA\)](#), includes a [financial transparency requirement](#) that

CONCLUSION

Access to curriculum, lesson plans, and materials will be more important as a growing number of states, districts, and schools implement [cellphone bans](#). Parents often learn about questionable and inappropriate materials presented by activist teachers through pictures and videos recorded by students. Parents will actively oppose cell phone and smartwatch bans if they cannot trust the teachers and staff at their children's residentially-assigned schools.

Implementing policies that guarantee academic and budget transparency, inform parents about their federal rights, and prevent schools from keeping secrets will help rebuild trust. Parents have the right to know what their children are learning, and schools have the responsibility to provide that information. States should implement policies that restore parental trust in schools and require full transparency.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Get Informed

Learn more about restoring trust and transparency in schools. Check out:

- [Trust Through Transparency Commitment](#)
- [Keep Politics Out of the Classroom with Academic Transparency](#)
- [Opting Out](#)
- [Time for 'Child's Given Name' Acts](#)

Talk to Your Friends

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

Become a Leader in the Community

Start an Independent Women's Network chapter group so you can get together with friends 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:

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Please visit us on our website iwf.org to get more information and consider making a donation to IWF.

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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.