



UNLOCKING THE FUTURE

Toward a new reform agenda
for K–12 education

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WHAT THE PANDEMIC TAUGHT US: DIRECT FUNDING FOR FAMILIES

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The past 20 years have been a fertile time for education reform—many ideas, many initiatives. But one idea that has not been fully realized is a market for educational opportunity driven by parental demand. There has been a lot of talk about parents, most of it about giving parents choices among schools and access to seats in different schools. But that is not enough.

What's needed is a true education marketplace, with direct funding to families as its foundational element. Without a marketplace of this kind, there will never be real reform. It's essential if we hope to create the education system of the future.

A long, strange trip

In April 2002, I got on a plane to Milwaukee, Wisconsin. I had just taken a job working for a New Jersey advocacy group promoting school choice, and we were taking a group of New Jersey community leaders and elected officials to see the private school choice program in Milwaukee in the hope that they would return home supporting the creation of something similar in their cities.

I'd never been to Milwaukee, but the idea of school choice made sense to me. I had a cousin who went to a magnet school in Baltimore. I myself had gone to high school on a scholarship,

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and it had changed my life for the better. At the end of the trip, I was convinced. How hard could this be?

It's been more than 20 years since that trip. Many parts of the education landscape, in New Jersey and America, have changed for the better. More states fund charter schools than in 2002. The country's first Black president supported school choice. School districts like New York City and Washington, DC, have experimented with mayoral control of education. A movement to identify and close racial education achievement gaps held policymakers' attention for more than a decade. Parental choice moved from the edges to the center of the political lexicon. This was all positive.

Despite these successes, it's also true that many of the assumptions that drove the choice and reform movements have proved unworkable. Many advocates believed that data-driven performance management could be used to encourage effective teaching, raising the level of the profession in a way that would be popular

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among both teachers and families. That effort now sits broken on a beach of bad studies and technocracy.

Others, myself among them, hoped that the stellar track record of many charter schools would speak for itself—that the movement’s success in closing the achievement gap would generate political support for a wholesale expansion of school choice. Instead, we have been disappointed by charter caps and the slowing pace of charter school growth. The movement has been blessed with strong leaders and effective advocates, but the inertia of low expectations and teachers unions’ influence has outlasted even the most talented and visionary managers in many school districts.

Political leaders have also disappointed us. Many Democrats fail to see how choice can benefit their core constituencies; they remain tepid on charters and broadly opposed to private school choice. Many Republicans speak the language of educational opportunity, but they give school choice lip service while strangling it on the statehouse floor. In all, there has been improvement here and there—a few bright lights—but nothing like the wholesale change many of us hoped for.

Even so, the reform movement might have been able to claim success if the pandemic had not created a host of new challenges. As many have recognized, Covid-19 exposed long-standing, fundamental inequities and inefficacies hardwired into many of the systems that undergird the American experiment. Nowhere was this more evident than in how the nation’s public schools handled the pandemic.

Children had to make do with poorly implemented virtual learning. Parents watching over their children’s shoulders in virtual classrooms were shaken by the dismal quality of instruction. In some states, policymakers unilaterally removed virtual options. Yet families that sought to return to in-person schooling were met with strikes, closed buildings and educator protests featuring coffins and scythes.

Women dropped out of the workforce to take charge of their families’ childcare. Childhood obesity, suicide and anxiety grew along with what we now know is disastrous learning loss. Unions championed teachers’ concerns as if they were the only thing that mattered, pushing the needs of parents and children to the fringes. Statewide assessments were imperiled, and with them, the record of the harm done to the nation’s children. What began as an earnest attempt to stop the spread of Covid turned into what can only be described as “hostage taking,” with states trading open schools for billions of dollars in federal aid.

In the wake of the pandemic, with its stresses and failures in full public view, the nation’s K–12 public schools are on the edge of a dangerous loss of public trust and confidence.

Millions of American families now wake up and wonder about the school day ahead: will it be in person or online, a whole day or a half day, with the child’s regular teacher or a substitute? Policymakers have promoted this uncertainty and raised fundamental questions about our norms for public education, as many states seem to ignore their constitutional commitment to provide compulsory education for all children. The old debates about school quality seem almost quaint—if only we were still arguing about how to advance school quality—and it feels almost impossible to resume that essential quest as part of a broader strategy for change.

The system is buckling under its own weight, strangled by its own politics. It cannot meet the challenges of the K–12 students who have missed reading windows or the high school students who have disappeared from state

enrollment data. It has no answer for the emotional stagnation of millions of learners of all ages.

Something different must be done. Something new and dynamic must be unleashed—not simply to meet the challenges of today but to produce the education system of the future.

A new set of assumptions

Improving outcomes and opportunities for students of color has been a North Star for educational reformers for many decades, and rightly so, as the Black-white achievement gap drove education policy in districts across the land. But this rationale is showing its age—it no longer works as the unifying force it once was.

We see this in the disconnect between families of color and Democrats on school choice issues, with African American and Hispanic parents strongly supportive and their traditional allies indifferent at best. Meanwhile, white suburban parents have rebelled against testing and scuttled teacher evaluations, and the anti-charter “SOS” groups have blocked much of the education reform movement’s core agenda. These doubters’ concerns must be reckoned with.

The future requires a revisiting of our old assumptions and two fundamental changes in approach. Instead of narrow strategies that focus on only the least well-served students in the name of equity, we must broaden the constituency that supports reform. And instead of concentrating our efforts on one education sector—charters or portfolio districts—we must reorient policy toward collaboration and universality.

Many suburbanites and white progressives fail to appreciate the role choice plays in closing the achievement gap for low-income kids of color. But we can’t reinvent the system without these groups. We need a strategy that includes them and draws on their support.

This will require marrying urban and suburban constituencies to create a more diverse base of support across ethnicity, income and geography.

More profoundly, it will require collaboration among different kinds of education providers, including private schools, charter schools, homeschooling families, learning cooperatives and pandemic-era startups such as pods and microschoools. Only a coalition this diverse will be taken seriously by policymakers and able to protect itself as political conditions change.

This new coalition will need a new agenda, and it should be based on education funding channeled through families rather than school districts.

Direct funding for families

Channeling education funding through school districts is a time-honored tradition in America, but today it is reinforcing everything that’s wrong with the status quo—all the questionable institutional arrangements, dubious incentives and vulnerabilities of the current system.

We won’t see the change we need without different incentives, and the best way to advance that is with an education marketplace driven by parents’ needs and demands. We must rethink how we finance education with that goal in mind.

The reformers of the past few decades aren’t wrong: dollars should follow students and be weighted by students’ needs. But that alone will not create the conditions for the education system of the future to emerge.

What we need is a true marketplace where families can express their preferences to shape the schools their children attend. Funding should be channeled directly to families—that’s the only way to give parents enough influence to drive meaningful change on the ground.

Parents must be able to decide how education dollars flow. They must be able to get around district leadership they no longer trust. A system built on direct funding will position families to break down the silos that now separate different types of schools—public, private and others.

It can also be a socioeconomic equalizer, giving all parents the power to demand the

bundling of educational opportunities that, for the most part, only affluent children now enjoy—for example, schools working with non-profits, museums, apprenticeship programs and other providers of extracurricular learning. Indeed, funding funneled to parents may be the only way to combat the inherent inequality of a district-driven approach—a universe in which the education children receive is primarily determined by where they live.

School districts have a lot of work to do to restore the trust they squandered during the pandemic—and over time, perhaps they will. But families need an alternative in the meantime. They need to be empowered to shape their children’s education directly with public funding.

But putting money in parents’ hands is only a first step. It should go hand in hand with three other reforms to help families make the most of their new leverage.

Build on the best of the pandemic. Nothing can make up for the tragic loss of life from Covid-19, but the pandemic had a silver lining for K–12 education. Children’s urgent educational needs and parental anxieties drove a willingness to experiment with change not seen since President Barack Obama’s Race to the Top.

Learning pods, microschoools, an explosion of tutoring and community learning efforts, boundary-breaking virtual offerings and a quantum leap in homeschooling gave new meaning to the phrase “school choice” and drove choice legislation in nearly 30 states. With K–12 public schools largely closed or delivering poorly implemented virtual instruction, families had to find another way, and their creativity knew no bounds. We must preserve this bias toward the new and prevent a retreat toward the sclerosis of the pre-pandemic years.

Create a market with new types of measurement. Every parent has a fundamental right to know how their child is doing in school, and for decades, our education system has measured

Something new must be done to ensure parents’ right to know.

progress with annual assessments given to all children. These tests can provide data to help educators intervene to support struggling students. But it’s difficult to argue that they are the best or easiest way to measure student learning, especially in a world where all children are different, with different dreams, talents and aspirations.

During the Obama years, many of the nation’s largest school districts tried to supplement these tests with performance-driven teacher evaluations, provoking a backlash that is still with us—resistance that has compromised the use of any assessments to provide the information parents need about the school systems in their communities.

Today, as the pandemic recedes, polling shows that parents are eager to know where their children stand after many years of disrupted learning. But annual assessments remain controversial, with parents and policymakers alike uncertain how best to measure schools and student performance. We need something different. Something new must be done to ensure that parents’ right to know is protected into the future.

One place to start is with the experimentation that emerged in the pandemic. Even as annual assessments were waived and some school districts led a race to the bottom by giving all children A’s, parents found ways to collect data from web-based applications and online platforms. Let’s build on that experimentation to create a marketplace based on performance and measurement—a marketplace organized by parents rather than policymakers and financed by families using funds that flow directly to them under a new approach to school financing.

We have only begun to imagine the possibilities. Whether a diagnostic by a local tutor, a learning portal that identifies gaps in what a student knows or a future innovation modeled on health fitness apps, there are many ways to deliver personal data in a timely and confidential manner. Annual assessments have a role to play in how state and district policymakers target resources and interventions, particularly for historically underserved students. But families deserve more, and there are many tools to choose among.

Eliminate boundaries. Pandemic-era innovation can also help us sever the age-old, pernicious link between residential segregation and schooling.

By definition, the neighborhood public school is rooted in a particular place, and for most of American history, place has been inextricably linked to race—racial exclusion and inequality.

The story starts with the corrosive history of redlining, the New Deal-era policy that prohibited banks from offering mortgages to African Americans in neighborhoods labeled “hazardous.” The next step was residential assignment in schools. A 1935 Federal Housing Administration underwriters manual laid out the toxic rationale: “If a neighborhood is to retain stability, it is necessary that properties shall continue to be occupied by the same social and racial classes. A change in social or racial occupancy generally leads to instability and a reduction in values.”

School financing based on property taxes reinforces this poisonous legacy and penalizes Black homeowners, as houses in heavily African American neighborhoods appreciate more slowly than elsewhere. Not only are families sequestered based on where they live, but they find themselves less able to fund their own schools.

This ossified link between education and place is what drives police officers to follow children home from school to confirm whether they live in the districts where they attend school. It puts parents in jail for trying to do what is right

for their children and bids up housing prices for young families across America. We can and must do better.

There are many models to build on: education not bound by place offered at independent and charter schools, magnet schools that draw children with similar interests from across their cities and now, in the wake of the pandemic, pods, community tutoring and hybrid homeschooling.

A new approach to school financing that puts money in parents’ hands can help families make the best of this abundance, and a new approach to measurement will provide the tools to help them choose the options that are best for their kids.

Next steps

Funding channeled directly to families isn’t a utopian dream. Many states are already experimenting with policies that put money in parents’ hands. Idaho’s “Strong Families, Strong Students” initiative sent \$50 million in grants to families. Kansas followed suit with bipartisan legislation also granting \$50 million directly to parents. Ohio and Nebraska have passed similar programs, while West Virginia and Arizona are experimenting with education savings accounts that prioritize children’s aspirations above where they live. Far from being a fringe policy, direct funding for families is moving to the center of the political agenda.

The education system of the future cannot be known—it’s up to us to build it. But the pandemic—both its egregious failures and the innovation it sparked—has taught us many lessons. Direct funding for families would provide a foundation to build on. Our kids and our nation deserve better, and the time to embrace the future is now.

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