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## Children Kept Out of Classrooms Need Policy Changes to Help Pursue Their Education

By Ben DeGrow

### Summary

Lawmakers can make it easier for parents to deal with the uncertainties of the next school year by adopting policies that give them the options they need.

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Some of Michigan's largest school districts, from Ann Arbor to Grand Rapids, have announced they will offer only full-time remote learning to start the fall term. That approach signals a troubling trend, for all students deserve access to regular classrooms and online options, so they can pursue what works best for them.

These preemptive closures go beyond what Gov. Gretchen Whitmer has urged in her 63 pages of back-to-school guidance. No place in the state has returned to phase 3 of the Michigan Safe Start plan, which requires full-time distance learning.

In a recent statewide survey, 64% of Michigan parents saw the recent experience with remote education as detrimental to student learning. A June poll found a majority of parents supported most hygiene and distancing protocols proposed as conditions of reopening schools. Only face mask requirements for younger children elicited widespread skepticism.

It's clear that for a variety of reasons, families have different levels of risk tolerance about gathering students back into school buildings. In supporting a move to start the school year with campuses closed, the president of the Lansing school board acknowledged that it's "impossible to keep everyone happy." Some Michigan districts seem better prepared to take on the challenge of providing alternatives, though perhaps they are just more highly motivated by outspoken parents who have other options.

Districts have until Aug. 17 to submit their plans for reopening to the state and post them online, a deadline that gives families little time to adapt. A number of districts have indicated they will offer both an in-person and online option, with some also letting parents sign on for a combination of both. This active embrace of flexibility may enable educators to help more students advance in their learning. School leaders may also be concerned that hesitation on their part, or hidebound retreats to familiar practices, could drive families away, and they could lose enrollment.

The state could help schools accommodate different family needs by adjusting its rules on calendar days and measuring student attendance. It could also help schools shift between virtual and regular classroom



Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic requires making changes to public education.

instruction. A bill package moving through the state Legislature would make these and other changes.

Officials are ill-equipped to decide whether to open or close school buildings for an entire state or nation. In the same way, districts are unwise to try to serve all students well through one mode of learning. The students who want to be back in a school building should have a safe option to attend. But they also may have some other needs and priorities that their current district isn't meeting.

If districts do not reopen buildings, or if they struggle to provide online instruction that students need to catch up or stay on track, some families with financial means will organize their own micro-schools, private co-ops or homeschool pods. That is their prerogative as the primary decision-makers concerning their children's education. But opportunities to adapt and take charge of learning should not be limited to families who can afford it. Parents shouldn't be forced to pay the price for a school's poor service any more than schools should be forced to open their doors.

Michigan lawmakers could step in to adopt several different policies to help make sure families have the options they need. First, they could suspend the statewide enrollment cap on cyber schools, which are public charter schools experienced in providing full-time online instruction. As most districts struggled to deliver distance learning this spring, cyber schools continued teaching, with very little disruption. These schools need legal authority to have enough virtual "seats" to be an effective outlet for students who transfer in.

Second, lawmakers should make funds available to families that opt to do their own schooling from home. This could come at a substantially smaller per-pupil cost to the state than the foundation allowance it guarantees to public schools. In addition to saving money, it would let families move smoothly away from conventional schooling. The funds could come either from a direct legislative appropriation or from refundable tax credits, and then be deposited in an account to pay for educational services and materials.

The unprecedented educational challenge before us demands support for true local decision-making that isn't stymied by locked schoolhouse doors. Parents need more diversified options so their children aren't left out in the cold.

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