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Honor Parents by Funding Students

By Ben DeGrow

Summary

As a record amount of funding goes to schools, Michigan's school districts and state leaders have the means to accommodate a variety of parental interests.

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Parents have a number of differing ideas about how their children should be educated.

Looking ahead to another fall of pandemic-related disruptions, Michigan has entrusted local education officials with the responsibility to decide COVID-19 policies and how to spend the bulk of federal COVID-19 relief funds. While school districts have yet to spend most of their large sums, many parents are left unsupported and searching for suitable learning options.

Many district officials are confounded by COVID-19 protocols and the difficulty of responding to families with differing levels of risk tolerance. Even as a groundswell of parents has pushed many districts to steer clear of mask and testing mandates, others have seen an organized response demanding the opposite. While state health officials urge everyone in school to wear masks, they have stopped short of issuing a mandate, which they did last academic year. School district leaders have been trapped in the middle.

The Democratic-controlled State Board of Education passed a resolution supporting local districts' "ability to make scientifically informed decisions including mask mandates." But at least some local leaders would prefer the decision be taken out of their hands. "If there was one policy across the state, we wouldn't have to argue about it," said Steve Matthews, superintendent of Novi Community Schools. "Having each district try to make its own decision pits districts against each other."

No statewide rule has been forthcoming, but some of the larger local health departments have weighed in to relieve school districts of the pressure. Oakland County imposed a mask mandate on all students age 4 through 12th grade. In their Aug. 24 order, public health officials in Michigan's second-largest county went further than their counterparts in places like Genesee, Kent and Kalamazoo counties. Orders in those other counties only extend up to sixth-grade students, who are not currently eligible to receive a COVID-19 vaccination.

It isn't clear how any of these orders will be enforced, or what the decisions will do to fall enrollments that determine a large portion of local public school funding. Homeschooling, cyber schooling and education pods may be options for some families. But others will have to work with their local schools to figure out how to navigate COVID-19 policies and their related consequences.

In areas where public health officials have not dictated masking rules, school districts should get creative. Local leaders could allow different schools within the same district to enact different protocols and give parents the ability to choose their preferred environment. School boards could also benefit from opening more slots to welcome nonresident students through Schools of Choice. Tight timelines challenge the logistics of such potential efforts, however, even though school systems have unprecedented funds at their disposal.

One year after recording an all-time high in per-pupil funding, Michigan's local education officials still have nearly all of their extra federal COVID-19 money left to spend. Most of the initial round of relief funds went to districts that operated fully remotely for most or all of last school year. As the lion's share of the money rolls in, many local education leaders struggle to know how to use it all. That's especially true for a handful of districts that will take in more extra dollars than a typical year's worth of total funding.

The three federal relief packages together provide roughly \$6 billion to the state's schools. Over \$5 billion comes through the main source: the Elementary and Secondary Schools Emergency Relief Fund. As of June, Michigan reported to the U.S. Department of Education that only 4% of the ESSER Fund had been expended. Districts must commit to allocate all remaining funds no later than September 2024.

Meanwhile, Gov. Gretchen Whitmer blocked the Legislature's attempt to allocate a tiny share of the federal COVID-19 funds for scholarships to parents of elementary students who need help catching up in reading. Michigan's COVID-19 dollars have swelled the bank accounts of education systems and agencies. But many frustrated families, receiving no direct support and facing a host of local pandemic-related challenges, are left in the lurch.

As the school year starts, financial cushions protect the education system. Given this fact, local officials must seek to honor parents, and state leaders must find the will to fund and empower parents to choose the mode of schooling they believe is best for their children.

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