

# Teachers Unions Inadvertently Ignited the Year of School Choice

By Corey DeAngelis

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## Key Points

- Through their response to the pandemic, unions overplayed their hand and exposed the inherent failures of the one-size-fits-all government school system.
- 2021 is the year of school choice. Eighteen states have enacted or expanded programs to fund students instead of systems over the past year—and support for school choice is at an all-time high.
- Parents are waking up, and there's no turning back: They don't want to feel powerless ever again. The teachers union empire is crumbling right before everyone's eyes, and it's the unions' own fault.

2021 has been the year of school choice, and it's not over yet.<sup>1</sup> Most remarkably, the success of school choice this year has been attributable less to its advocates than to its worst enemies: teachers unions. Through their response to the pandemic, unions overplayed their hand and exposed the inherent failures of the one-size-fits-all government school system.<sup>2</sup> Families are now thankfully figuring out that there isn't any good reason to fund institutions when we can fund students directly instead.

Support for school choice is through the roof. The latest nationwide survey by RealClear Opinion Research found support for school choice jumped by 10 percentage points over the past year—from 64 percent support in April 2020 to 74 percent support in June 2021.<sup>3</sup> Polling from Morning Consult similarly found surges in support for all types of school choice from spring to fall 2020.<sup>4</sup>

Another nationwide poll of America's 18- to 29-year-olds, conducted by Harvard University, found a 10 percentage point increase in support for expanding educational freedom over the past two years—from 63 percent support among respondents in 2019 to 73 percent support in 2021.<sup>5</sup>

Eighteen states enacted or expanded programs to fund students instead of systems this year.<sup>6</sup> The number of states with education savings account programs—the purest form of funding students directly and empowering families—doubled from five to 10 this year.<sup>7</sup>

The power imbalance between the public school monopoly and families was made clearer than ever. Parents were willing to put up with their children's schools receiving taxpayer money while failing to adequately meet their needs year after year. But it became another thing entirely when those schools took that money but refused to provide in-person service.

Private schools were fighting to reopen. Teachers unions were fighting to keep public schools closed. Private schools filed legal cases to fight for their right to provide in-person services for families in states such as California, Kentucky, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin.<sup>8</sup> A Catholic private school in Sacramento, California, even rebranded itself as a day care to get around the government's arbitrary closure rules that applied to schools but not childcare providers.<sup>9</sup>

The main difference was one of incentives. Private school leaders understood their customers could take their money elsewhere if adequate services weren't provided. Public schools received children's education dollars regardless of whether they opened their doors for business.

Teachers unions prioritized their monopoly at all costs. The same month public schools started to close nationwide, for example, unions lobbied the government to make it illegal for families to switch to virtual charter schools in states such as Oregon and Pennsylvania.<sup>10</sup> They sought to protect the system at the expense of families at the worst time possible.

Unions showed their true colors by lumping political demands into discussions about reopening schools. For example, in its report on safely reopening schools, United Teachers Los Angeles included demands such as providing Medicare for All, implementing a wealth tax, defunding the police, and banning charter schools.<sup>11</sup> On two occasions, about a dozen teachers unions joined coalitions, including the Democratic Socialists of America, to "demand safe schools" by holding "national days of resistance."<sup>12</sup> Included in their lists of demands was more federal funding, police-free schools, rent cancellation, and a ban on new charter schools. These were hardly the first cases of unions acting politically, but in their cumulative effect, such excesses became national headline news and made their way into kitchen table conversations.

Their hypocrisy knew no limits. The president of the Berkeley Federation of Teachers was caught sending his child to private school in person, even though he railed against reopening public schools in person.<sup>13</sup> Public school districts were charging families hundreds of dollars per child per week out of pocket for in-person childcare services in the

same school buildings they deemed unsafe for in-person learning.<sup>14</sup>

A Chicago Teachers Union board member was caught vacationing in Puerto Rico while fighting against plans to reopen schools in person.<sup>15</sup> If it was safe enough to vacation in Puerto Rico in person, why wasn't it safe enough to return to work in person? The obvious explanation: It's more enjoyable to vacation in person than to work in person.

However, I don't really blame the public school employees. The problem is the perverse set of incentives that's baked into the system. But the reality is that the school reopening debate was always more about politics and power than safety and families' needs.<sup>16</sup>

The public school system's version of virtual learning was a failure for many children, academically and socially. At the same time, remote instruction allowed families to get a closer look at what was going on in their children's classrooms, and many parents weren't happy with what they viewed to be ideological indoctrination.<sup>17</sup> This unexpected increase in transparency further fueled parents' calls for more control over their children's educations.

The good news is the teachers unions can't help themselves. They're unleashing renewed calls for school choice by pushing for curriculum and masking rules that many families dislike. The latest battles over curriculum, masking, and reopening are all symptoms of the problem that is the one-size-fits-all government school system. Thankfully, more people are now seeing that the best solution to these problems is funding students directly.

Earlier this month, the Florida Board of Education unanimously approved allowing all families to take their children's education dollars elsewhere if they disagree with their public school's masking rules.<sup>18</sup> And the eligibility works both ways—whether the family disagrees with a mask mandate or a ban.

In Arizona, Gov. Doug Ducey announced a new program allowing income-eligible families to take their children's education dollars elsewhere if their public schools close, mandate masks, or subject children to other COVID-19 constraints.<sup>19</sup> Tennessee's Speaker of the House Cameron Sexton and Texas state Rep. Briscoe Cain also publicly supported the idea to fund students directly.<sup>20</sup>

This is the only way forward without forcing one-size-fits-all mandates or bans on other people's children. Families will never unsee what they have witnessed from the teachers unions over the past year. Parents are waking up, and there's no

turning back: They don't want to feel powerless ever again. The teachers union empire is crumbling right before everyone's eyes, and it's the unions' own fault.

## About the Author

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## Notes

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