

February 2021 #21-08

Summary:

For almost a year, Oregon families have struggled with virtual instruction and uncertain school reopening plans. Legislators should enact a school choice law now, so families can choose education options that work best for their students, in whatever circumstances they find themselves today.

Word Count: 709

“Giving families control over a portion of the state’s per-pupil education funding to spend on tuition and other education resources would empower parents to find immediate solutions that match their children’s needs, their work schedules, and their health concerns.”

Empower Oregon Families Today by Funding Students, Not Systems

By Kathryn Hickok and Helen Doran

Every parent knows a solid education prepares children for life, and that path begins in grade school. Almost a year ago, the COVID-19 pandemic closed school buildings for in-person classroom instruction. But even before the coronavirus upended K-12 school routines, many Oregon students were trapped in schools that didn’t meet their educational needs, with no access to meaningful alternatives.

As schools begin to reopen, state policymakers and legislators should recognize that Oregon families urgently need more options so they can [find the right fit for their children](#) to learn effectively and safely. Traditional public schools, charter schools, magnet schools, online learning, private and parochial schools, homeschooling, and tutoring are all paths to success for students. All options should be valued, and parents should be empowered to choose among them to help their children succeed.

[Giving families control over a portion of the state’s per-pupil education funding](#) to spend on tuition and other education resources would empower parents to find immediate solutions that match their children’s needs, their work schedules, and their health concerns. More than half the states in the U.S. currently give families flexibility to direct their children’s education through [education choice programs](#) like scholarships, tax credits, and Education Savings Accounts.

[Education Savings Account programs](#) (ESAs) give parents a kind of “money-back guarantee” if they want to opt out of their zoned public schools for other options. ESA programs currently operating in five states deposit a portion of the state school funding that would be spent for a student in a public school into an account associated with the child’s family. Families can use those funds to pay for tuition or other education expenses. [Senate Bill 658](#), which has been introduced in the 2021 Oregon Legislative Session, would establish an ESA program for Oregon parents.

Many Oregon families already have “school choice.” They move to neighborhoods with public schools they like, enroll their kids in tuition-based schools or public charter schools, or get online classes or tutoring. In response to the loss of in-person learning during the pandemic, parents have formed “pod schools” to teach their kids in small groups. Thousands of Oregonians successfully homeschooled before the pandemic, and many more became their children’s official teachers in 2020.



But other families don't have the financial resources to "pay twice" for education—once through their taxes and again through tuition or out-of-pocket fees. Or, they don't have the work or family flexibility to monitor their children's at-home, public school distance learning programs or to homeschool their kids full-time. Low-income and minority families, especially, are most often stuck with only one option: district schools assigned to them based on their home addresses, and the instruction options those schools provide for them.

All children should be able to attend schools where they can thrive. But those who deserve school choice the most are those at greatest risk of falling behind and not graduating from high school on time—or at all. According to the National Association of Education Progress, only [34% of Oregon fourth-graders tested "proficient" in reading](#) in 2019. Moreover, our state continues to have one of the lowest graduation rates in the country. Changing those outcomes requires a solid early education leading to graduation and employment. Early intervention makes all the difference in a student's long-term education success.

Parents increasingly support the idea of more education choices for their children, especially when their designated public schools are not meeting their students' needs. In fact, a RealClear Opinion Poll in late 2020 showed that [almost 80% of parents now support the concept of governments sending education funding directly to families](#) and allowing parents to choose how those funds support their child's education.

As families continue to struggle with virtual programs and uncertain school reopening plans, it is vital that students have access to options that will work for them now and in the future. Giving parents the means to choose which schools or learning options best fit their child's needs will put the power of education back into the hands of parents, where it belongs. Oregon legislators should enact a school choice law now, to give opportunity to families who need to get—or keep—their kids engaged, learning, and on-track for graduation, in whatever circumstances they find themselves today.

Kathryn Hickok is Executive Vice President at Cascade Policy Institute, Oregon's free market public policy research organization. She is also director of Cascade's Children's Scholarship Fund-Oregon program, which provides partial tuition scholarships to Oregon elementary students from lower-income families. Helen Doran is Program Assistant for External Affairs at Cascade Policy Institute.

““...[A] RealClear Opinion Poll in late 2020 showed that almost 80% of parents now support the concept of governments sending education funding directly to families and allowing parents to choose how those funds support their child's education.”

Attention editors
and producers:

Cascade Commentaries are provided for reprint in newspapers and other publications, with credit given to author(s) and Cascade. Contact Cascade to arrange print or broadcast interviews on this commentary topic.

Please contact:

Cascade Policy Institute
4850 SW Scholls Ferry Rd.
Suite 103
Portland, Oregon 97225

Phone: (503) 242-0900
Fax: (503) 242-3822

www.cascadepolicy.org
info@cascadepolicy.org