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Suburban Families Haven't Always Been Allies of School Choice, But That's Changing

By Keith Jacobs



Middle class, suburban families, once likely opponents of education choice, are now rallying behind the right to choose where to send their children to school.

All it took was a pandemic that suddenly limited their options.

Since the spring, school districts across the nation grappling with COVID-19 have closed their brick-and-mortar doors and moved students to online learning. Many families already irate over mask mandates and restricted access outside their homes were overwhelmed by an explosion of anger, shock, tears, and questions about their children being forced to learn in an unfamiliar environment where they may not succeed.

RECENT POLLS SHOW AN INCREASE IN SUPPORT FOR CHOICE AMONG PARENTS WITH CHILDREN IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS.

Now these families are finally advocating for education choice. Recent polls show an increase in support for choice among parents with children in public schools.

Welcome aboard!

For decades limited options have been the everyday reality for millions of low-income families trapped in their ZIP code, their children forced to attend a public school assigned them by a district. These parents have been denied their right to choose the schools that work best for their children. The pandemic also has forced them to figure out how to educate their children at home when they are deemed "essential workers," while also facing the harsh reality of the digital divide. Even more, they need flexible spending options to purchase technology and other learning resources.

These low-income families have been denied the privilege of having options because too many suburban families and politicians have refused to acknowledge that parent choice must be available to all. Choice promotes equity in education and provides access to opportunities to close both the wealth, opportunity and achievement gaps.

Furthermore, these suburban families and policymakers have opposed education choice under the guise of preserving public education. They lead you to believe that attending your local public school is the best choice for parents even though in states like my home state of Florida, 48% of students, or 1.7 million, are now attending something other than their zoned schools.

RESTRICTING ACCESS AND OPPORTUNITY ARE DETRIMENTAL TO THEIR CHILD'S SUCCESS.

This has been a rallying cry for low-income families fighting for the right to choose. Ironically, suburban families are now echoing these same sentiments. They've always exercised choice by having the means to live in their preferred school attendance zone. Now that they have had that avenue blocked by pandemic-closed brick-and-mortar schools, they are finally seeing how restricting access and opportunity are detrimental to their child's success.

In response, some of these suburban families are turning to "pandemic pods." These pods provide them the option of gathering a small group of students and hiring a teacher to help with online or hybrid learning. Although innovative, they also can be exclusionary, reinforcing racial and socioeconomic segregation, because most low-income families can't afford to pay for this level of service. This further demonstrates how privilege and financial flexibility continue to be the acceptable form of education choice.

The hypocrisy of this position is that these same families and policymakers who often declare they "can't support programs that take money from public schools" are doing exactly that with these pandemic pods. What they really mean is that they support the traditional public education system right up until they feel their choices have been restricted, and can thus use their financial capital to exercise choice.

Low-income families are entitled to the same fulfillment of equal opportunity. They shouldn't have to fight to exercise these rights. They should be able to spend their education dollars as they see fit—on technology, on pods—whatever works best. They need allies like the suburban families and lawmakers who understand that some parents already have a right to choose.

Have these suburban families who typically oppose education choice options decided to join the fight for education equity? One can hope.

THIS IS THE RIGHT TIME TO SUPPORT THE SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUE OF OUR ERA BY SUPPORTING A PARENT'S RIGHT TO CHOOSE.

If necessity is the mother of invention, this is the right time to support the social justice issue of our era by supporting a parent's right to choose—while being provided the means and flexibility to make that choice. Now more than ever, we all need options.