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EDUCATION AT A CROSSROADS

American public education is at a crossroads. We face unforeseen and unique challenges educating the next generation during this global pandemic. It will necessitate concerted effort to make certain every student has the opportunity to succeed, regardless of where they live, especially during COVID-19.

We must get the correct support for our students, educators, and schools. It will also require thought, commitment, and willingness to reduce the federal footprint in public schools and give the power to make decisions on education back to those closest to the people.

Our stakeholders and policymakers must carefully address critical issues in the next few months. Through education, we can create a healthier economy and society. Whatever we do in public education now will determine what is possible in our economy and society later. We must strategically frame the problems in public education. Then we must offer realistic and attainable solutions for longer-term systemic change.

This pandemic allows us to address long-standing needs in public education. We must help the public see what is possible in public education, with truthful unfiltered dialogue, by creating constructive and necessary change all while keeping the public trust and being transparent. Too many decisions are being made by unelected bureaucrats with little oversight.

There is very little doubt that closed schools create immense challenges for parents. Virtual education has been used as a stopgap measure in most cases, with schools and districts going online while trying to educate children. Often policymakers merely throw around the concept of virtual education, without acknowledging the real challenges faced by districts to enact such a transition.

The pace at which our schools and districts moved during this COVID-19 crisis was unprecedented in American education history. We have not even begun to understand what has worked and what has failed, and still, we are being told to keep pushing in that direction. The question to ask is: Are we building on solid ground or are we tilting at windmills?

Online classes may be problematic, especially for younger students. However, we should certainly work to include them in future efforts. Nevertheless, we know some students simply do not respond well to online classes. Even where students have been issued laptops and tablets, there is no guarantee that they will have

SUMMARY

The major problem with education public policy positions is that they are often made far in advance and do not allow for real-time adjustments. To be effective, we need more engagement and more voices at the table, and we need to be able to make adjustments when necessary.

access to the internet at home. Some students don't do well in a cyber environment as distance learning is not effective without proper supervision. Input from parents and educators will be critical for research.

Many think tanks and politicians are making dire predictions of student learning loss triggered by COVID-19. Certainly, some students across the nation did experience learning loss. Some of these projections are meaningless speculation, considering the inconsistent back-to-school methods being used nationwide. Indeed, inequities were likely magnified for low-income students, those with disabilities, and students who lacked distance learning capabilities compared to students who were better supported.

There will always be questions surrounding the relationships between local and state government and the delivery of public education. The role of the federal government will always invite criticism, and it should. Policymakers and stakeholders seem to always ask the question about whether we have too many expectations and given too much responsibility to our schools.

It is necessary to examine the role of our public schools, and question if what we ask them to do is working, and will it work to create a modern economy and prepare citizens for college and career. Since the pandemic, there has been a seismic shift in some states to exert more control over local schools and districts. We must push back there as well.

Think tanks and advocacy organizations are often staffed with people who lack real world experience or a background in education, and who carve out policy positions based on donor activity. They then enjoy favored status over state and local education decisions.

For example, almost as on cue, many are out pushing statewide assessments to measure student learning and accountability. The major problem with that position is that these position papers are written far in advance and do not allow for real-time adjustments. A military commander, for example, knows he has to make battlefield adjustments. The same is true in public policy. Military leaders know that battle plans may not survive after the first shot. The enemy has a vote in best-made plans. Reality has a way of modifying our plans that many bureaucrats and think tanks do not understand.

Education is at a crossroads, where we go next cannot be left to the past. We need to build toward the future with renewed commitment and empowering more local control. We need more engagement and more voices at the table, and we need to be able to make adjustments when necessary.

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