

The COVID-19 Edition of 'Race to the Top'

Remember the [Common Core](#), the national curriculum standards that sparked a conflagration over who should control what every public school child in America would learn? If nothing else, you might recall a little [Core comedy](#), though in many places the Core is still with us in various forms. What you might not recall is how the Core became a sudden national issue: the federal [Race to the Top](#), a competition held by the U.S. Department of Education in which states battled for a slice of \$4.35 billion in "stimulus" funds.

It looks like we're about to have "Race to the Top: COVID-19."

According to the Department of Education, [1 percent of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security \(CARES\) Act funding](#) for the \$30.75 billion Education Stabilization Fund is slated for "two separate grant competitions" aimed at states "most affected by coronavirus." The two programs are Education Stabilization Fund-□Rethink K12 Education Models Grants and Education Stabilization Fund-□Reimagining Workforce Preparation Grants.

According to reporting in [Chalkbeat](#), about \$180 million will go to states that pursue one or all of the following administration-□favored policies:

1. "Microgrants" that families can use to pay for tutoring, summer programs, tuition to a private school, and more
2. A statewide virtual school or other avenue for students to access classes their schools do not offer
3. Some other program "for providing remote education not yet imagined, to ensure that every child is learning and preparing for successful careers and lives."

What "microgrants" are is pretty clear. *Chalkbeat* reporter

Matt Barnum says some people would call them “vouchers,” though they look more like education savings accounts in that they can be applied to multiple uses beyond private school tuition. Regardless, they are a school-choice delivery mechanism, which is ordinarily a good thing. Except...

As I have [argued before](#), while school choice is good, a broad federal program would be bad, presenting a real threat of not just new regulation of private schools, but regulation on a national basis. As families started using federal aid it would bring in tentacles all from one creature: the federal government. No having to go state-by-state if you want to control private schools – just lobby Washington.

But that’s not all! A grant competition is even worse than a federal program created by a normal legislative process that includes public debates, voting, a potential veto, and more that subjects the policy to open public scrutiny. This is rule by bureaucracy – by secretary – which is an even bigger threat to freedom because it allows a single person or unaccountable bureaucracy to pick winning and losing policies.

The Common Core imbroglio illustrated the danger of such policymaking, foisting a policy of highly [dubious efficacy](#) on everyone, and eventually launching a debate likely made more wrenching than normal because it did not come until after people discovered their kids would be subject to the Core and they demanded to know, “how dare you inflict this on us without even so much as a vote?”

The good news is that this new competition is for much lower stakes than Race to the Top – \$4.35 billion versus \$180 million – but relative dollars often do not matter that much. Whether a headline says a state will lose out on \$500 million or \$5 million by not dancing to Washington’s tune, it looks like a lot of money to most people.

I am, of course, far more favorable to school choice than to

national curriculum standards; generally speaking, the former moves towards freedom, the latter farther away. But whether you like the goal or not, bureaucratic contests are an unacceptable way to make policy.

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