

Reopening Schools: What Betsy DeVos Gets Wrong and Homeschoolers Get Right

While the pandemic itself is generating much uncertainty, the battle over back-to-school is causing downright whiplash.

Last month, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) [recommended](#) that schools work to reopen for in-person learning this fall. The physician group stated that it “strongly advocates that all policy considerations for the coming school year should start with a goal of having students physically present in school” and that “children may be less likely to become infected and to spread infection.”

In a June interview with *The New York Times*, Dr. Sean O’Leary, one of the pediatricians who helped to write the AAP guidelines, [explained](#): “Reopening schools is so important for the kids, but really for the entire community. So much of our world relies on kids being in school and parents being able to work... As a country, we should be doing everything we can right now, for lots of reasons, to make sure we can safely reopen schools in the fall.”

On July 7th, the Trump administration cited the AAP recommendation when it [called](#) for schools to reopen fully, as they are planning to do in states like [Florida](#), and [threatened](#) to cut off federal funding to schools that don’t reopen. And U.S. Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, has been making the media rounds campaigning for schools to be reopened.

On July 8th, New York City mayor Bill de Blasio [announced](#) that the city’s schools would not fully reopen this fall and would instead implement a partial reopening with children attending school one to three days a week.

Then on July 10th, the AAP, along with the nation's two largest teachers' unions, issued a clarifying [statement](#) urging more caution about in-person school reopening, stating: "We should leave it to health experts to tell us when the time is best to open up school buildings, and listen to educators and administrators to shape how we do it."

On Monday, the Los Angeles and San Diego school districts [announced](#) that they would be pursuing online-only learning this fall, citing rising virus cases in parts of California. Then yesterday, scientists and educators with the renowned National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine [issued](#) a statement [recommending](#) that schools reopen for in-person learning for elementary grade students and for those with special needs, explaining that virtual learning is not effective for most of these children.

As this back-to-school bandying continues, more parents are saying "enough is enough" and are opting out of conventional schooling this fall in favor of homeschooling. I [wrote](#) last week that some of these parents are choosing homeschooling due to ongoing virus fears, but many of them are more concerned about institutional responses to the virus. [Strict social distancing requirements](#), such as all-day mask-wearing and limited contact with other children and teachers, are prompting parents to choose to homeschool, even if just for the short-term. But for some parents, homeschooling may continue indefinitely.

An [article](#) in today's *New York Times* highlights the mounting interest in homeschooling this fall, stating: "While some parents are counting down the days till they can get their kids back into the classroom, a growing number of families are thinking about home schooling this fall." The article describes one mother who discovered that her child has been much happier since schools were shut down last spring due to COVID-19. She told the *Times*: "One child was experiencing headaches every day, and ever since being home, those tension

headaches are nonexistent.” Seeing such a positive shift in her child’s well-being, this mother is now choosing full-time homeschooling.

The *Times* article does a good job of explaining that the pandemic-induced, forced homeschooling that families endured earlier this year is nothing like authentic, chosen homeschooling that more parents are now considering. According to today’s [article](#):

“Advocates of full-time home schooling say it bears little resemblance to the online schooling that many students and families experienced as states locked down this spring as a result of the coronavirus crisis. With home schooling, students aren’t tied to classroom deadlines to complete a math worksheet or history essay, and parents don’t have to scramble to find art supplies to complete an assignment. Children can sleep as late as they need, and parents can assist with school work on their own terms and schedules.”

In addition to children being happier and less stressed, and families having more freedom and flexibility over what, how, when, and with whom their children learn, homeschooling can also lead to [better overall learning](#). Curriculum and educational tools can be tailored to a child’s distinct needs and interests, and many [free, online learning resources](#) can enhance academic outcomes.

In her push to reopen schools, Betsy DeVos has been [saying](#) that, “kids cannot afford to not continue learning.” Although DeVos has done much to champion educational liberty, here she makes a common mistake. As Peter Gray wrote in the foreword to my book [Unschooled: Raising Curious, Well-Educated Children Outside the Conventional Classroom](#):

Too often, in everyday language, we equate education with schooling. We ask someone “How much education have you had?,” and we expect them to tell us about the number of years they

spent in school or their highest diploma. But any serious consideration of education requires us to think of it as something much bigger than and quite different from schooling and as something impossible to quantify. (...)

Education is something quite different from schooling, and it has been part and parcel of our human nature for as long as we have been humans.

□During these school closures, many parents have discovered this distinction between education and schooling for themselves, as they watch their children flourish and learn in ways that school would have never allowed.

For parents who are interested in homeschooling this fall but need to work full-time or balance other responsibilities, “microschooling” is gaining popularity amid the pandemic. Microschools are typically multi-age, home-based learning communities with a handful of children (usually no more than a dozen), who receive instruction from one or more educators or parent guides.

Anecdotally, I have talked with several families in my area who are planning to keep their children home in the fall, even if their schools reopen. They are being creative about learning plans this year, including connecting with other like-minded parents and forming small microschool co-ops, where the parents take turns teaching and supervising children in their homes. Some are considering hiring a teacher or student-teacher to conduct small classes. A [Good Morning America](#) spotlight this week suggests that the microschool approach is a growing trend among families this fall.

As politicians and bureaucrats continue to battle over what back-to-school should look like, more parents are taking matters into their own hands. They are reassuming control of their children’s education, finding innovative ways to facilitate learning, and connecting with other parents for

support and collaboration.

Where central plans flounder, individual solutions flourish.

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