

Give Lower-Income Families True Choices

Let Kids Learn aims to bridge educational opportunity divide

By Ben DeGrow | April 2022

The evidence is in: Demand for private school enrollment is growing in Michigan, reversing a years-long trend. For those concerned that this trend might worsen educational gaps between rich and poor, voters have a solution right now.

A recent Bridge Michigan piece highlights the resurgence of students attending private education options. In the two years since reaction to the pandemic disrupted normal routines, private religious schools have welcomed an extra 3% to 5% of students. This represents less than half of the losses Michigan private schools experienced in the previous decade. A driving factor for the rebound is that these schools consistently kept classrooms open, in clear contrast with many school districts' remote instruction programs.

Over the last two years, public school enrollments have dropped at about the same rate as their private school counterparts have risen. Districts that denied students in-person options for most of 2020-21 experienced some of the biggest declines. University of

Michigan education professor Kevin Stange, who has been researching the state's school enrollment trends, observes that most families who switched from public to private education have not returned.

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Students kept out of face-to-face classes the longest have fallen furthest behind in their learning as a result. Most troubling, they are more likely to be at-risk students who could least afford the setback. The Bridge article cited Stange's concerns about expanding achievement gaps because more affluent families can find a way to pay tuition. Private school is "not an option for lower-income families," he said.

Left out of the conversation was one key solution that could help level the playing field for thousands of families. The Let Kids Learn initiative, revived after a 2021 veto by Gov. Whitmer, would use state income tax credits to encourage private donations to K-12 student scholarships that could pay for private tuition, among other options. The flexible education spending proposed by this initiative is favored by 65% of

Michigan voters and, perhaps unsurprisingly, 74% of parents of school-aged children.

Students from low- and middle-income households, as well as those with disabilities, would benefit from new educational opportunities previously unavailable to them. And scholarship support wouldn't be limited to students pursuing private education. Public school students could apply for aid to supplement their regular education with tutoring and learning materials, much like what Ohio has approved through its new ACE education savings account program.

The \$500 million cap on Let Kids Learn tax credit donations represents a tiny fraction of Michigan's \$17 billion and growing school aid budget, but could make a big difference for many students struggling to catch up in the wake of restrictive pandemic policies.

An additional victory may be needed to secure the full range of opportunities for students. The Mackinac Center's federal lawsuit on behalf of five Michigan families seeks to bring down a state constitutional provision that has stood in the way of expanding private school choice for a half-century.

Regardless, we shouldn't have to settle for unsettling accounts of widening achievement gaps as the final word of COVID schooling. A clear path to bridge the divide between the educational haves and have-nots lies squarely before us. It's time to press forward and Let Kids Learn.

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Ben DeGrow is the director of education policy at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy.



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