

**School Choice Options Amid Coronavirus Pandemic
in the United States**

Austin Armentrout

Liberty University Helms School of Government

March 5, 2021

Austin Armentrout is from Staunton, Virginia, where he is active in local politics and is currently interning with a local Attorney's Office. Austin graduated from Liberty University in December of 2020 Magna Cum Laude with a Bachelor of Science Degree in Government: Politics and Policy and with a minor in Business. During his time at Liberty, Austin was an active Delegate in Student Government, member of the College Republicans, and took part in the Mid-Atlantic European Union Simulation. Austin plans to attend Liberty University School of Law this Fall to study Criminal Law.

The Coronavirus has changed every aspect of life in the United States and around the world. Although the pandemic's effects can easily be seen in the fields of healthcare and business, the lasting effects on the field of education are not as clearly visible. The Covid-19 pandemic restrictions have placed an enormous burden on both k-12 public and private educational establishments. The ability of the different types of schools to adapt to these restrictions has contributed to students transferring to private schools.

The Coronavirus, also commonly known as Covid-19, caused a worldwide epidemic and changed the lives of every person on the planet. The outbreak of this disease occurred in December of 2019 in Wuhan City, China. The specific cause of the outbreak has been disputed and heavily debated by public officials. The World Health Organization states the disease's origin as a wholesale food market in Wuhan.¹ Some public officials, including former U.S.

¹ World Health Organization. *Coronavirus Disease 2019 Situation Report-94*. April 23, 2020. https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200423-sitrep-94-covid-19.pdf?sfvrsn=b8304bf0_4 (accessed January 28, 2021).

Deputy National Security Advisor Matthew Pottinger, argue that the disease may have been leaked from a Chinese government-run laboratory in the city of Wuhan.² Despite where the disease originated, its effects have proven humanly and economically costly to countries around the world. As of January 27th, over 400,000 Americans, which is a portion of the 2.16 million worldwide that have died from Covid-19.³

Economically, the Coronavirus has devastated the American economy by killing hundreds of thousands of businesses across the country. The virus continues to affect the businesses that have survived thus far. According to the Alignable's Small Business Funding Needs Report, only 43% of small businesses are confident that they can stay in operation through June of 2021. Additionally, 85% of small business owners are in need of economic relief because of lessened earnings.⁴ This data suggests that the economic damage of the pandemic will continue to worsen.

In addition to the healthcare and business fields, America's educational field has experienced drastic changes from the Coronavirus pandemic. Schools around the country have had a difficult time adjusting to the Covid-19 precautions and preventative measures. Schools have been placed with the burden of ensuring a safe educational environment for students and staff during an unprecedented pandemic. The preventative measures that students and staff must abide by are wearing face coverings (masks) and maintaining six feet of social distancing if possible. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) also strongly urged people to disinfect surfaces and wash their hands frequently. These preventative measures proved to be a challenge for school systems because each school is unique and required an individualized approach. Factors such as management structure and school size have led parents across the United States to take their children out of public schools and enroll them in private or homeschool.

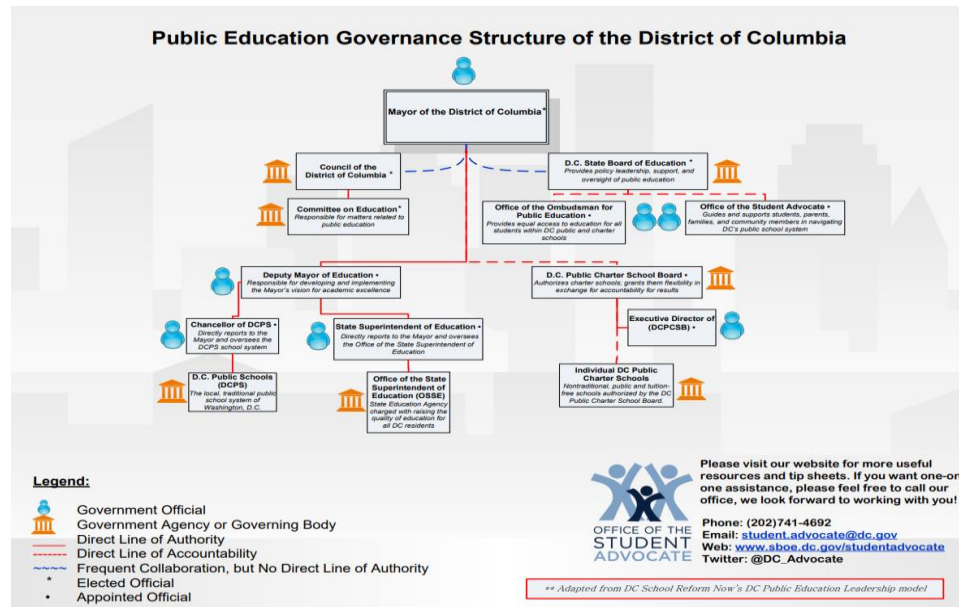
The first reason that parents are reconsidering their children's public-school education is the structure of management in public schools. In the public school system decisions on how schools are operated are not made locally. The Covid-19 pandemic has drawn attention to this fact because individual public schools did not have the power or the authority to make decisions about reopening. This is because the management structure of public schools is not centralized. There are many levels to public school management, which include a school board, a

² Sara Dorn. 'Growing body of evidence' shows COVID-19 leaked from Chinese lab: US official. January 2, 2021. <https://nypost.com/2021/01/02/growing-body-of-evidence-shows-covid-19-leaked-from-chinese-lab-us-official/> (accessed January 28, 2021).

³ University of Oxford. *Our World in Data: Coronavirus (COVID-19) Deaths*. January 28, 2021. <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-deaths> (accessed January 28, 2021).

⁴ Eric Groves. *Alignable: SPECIAL REPORT -- COVID Crisis Relief Needed to Keep Small Business Economy Afloat*. December 10, 2020. <https://www.alignable.com/forum/special-report-covid-crisis-needed-to-keep-small-business-economy> (accessed February 1, 2021).

superintendent, and political officials who serve at the state level. For a visual representation of this multi-tiered management structure of public schools, the picture shows the Public Education Governance Structure of the District of Columbia.



It is easy to see that there are multiple levels of management that range from the D.C. Mayor at the top, to the school superintendent at the lower level. This chart also shows the levels of elected and unelected bureaucracy that determine how the public schools operate. Public schools in the fifty states have similar hierarchies that have their state's governor at the top. Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been a power struggle between the different levels to determine who has the authority to open or close schools. Local school boards and localities wanted to make the decision, but they were met with disagreement from state officials. In many states, the governor made the decision to close schools, after being advised by health officials.⁵ This created a level of divide because the governor made the decision to shut down schools, but local school boards were tasked with how to educate children with schools ordered to be closed. Many school boards were forced to shift students to online learning with programs like Zoom or Microsoft Teams.

On the other hand, private schools have a centralized form of management, usually in the form of a board of Trustees and a president. This centralized management can make decisions faster and only makes decisions for its own educational establishment. The targeted management of private schools allows each private educational institution to adapt in a way that better suits its size and capabilities. As McCluskey and DeAngelis find in their article titled "Decentralize K-12

⁵ Kalyn Belsha. *Coronavirus: Who gets to decide how schools work this fall? It's complicated.* May 30, 2020. <https://www.chalkbeat.org/2020/5/29/21275024/who-gets-to-decide-how-schools-work-this-fall-its-complicated> (accessed February 10, 2021).

Education,” private and homeschooled students were better equipped to transition to online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic because of their management structure.⁶ McCluskey’s article cites two studies that were conducted in April of 2020 as schools were struggling to transition to online learning at the beginning on the pandemic. The first study was conducted by the American Enterprise Institute from April 7-14 with public schools. The study found that 20% of public schools did not offer remote or online instruction and that 54% of public schools did not offer online instruction within 2 weeks of closing.⁷ For those two weeks, students had great difficulty completing assignments with limited email communications with their teachers. The second study was conducted by EdChoice focused on private schools, both religious and nonreligious, during April 2020. This study found that in the month of April about 88% of private schools surveyed offered their entire curriculum transitioned to an online format, with a much shorter transition period.⁸ These two studies show that in the month of April, at the point of the pandemic when schools began to completely close, that private schools did a better job of transitioning to an online format. Both Public and Private schools faced the same sudden changes because of the pandemic, but because of the localized or targeted management of private schools, they were able to adapt quicker to the changes in a more efficient way. In fact, some private schools were able to follow Covid-19 guidelines without making students transition to online education.

The second reason that parents are switching their children to private school is school size. Many parents want their children in smaller learning environments during the pandemic because it allows students to remain in the classroom while still following Covid-19 preventative measures. Most private schools have less students than public schools, as well as larger campuses and smaller classes. In 2021, the average private school in the United States has 175 students, while the average public school has 526 students.⁹ This significant difference in

⁶ Neal McCluskey and Corey DeAngelis. *Decentralize K–12 Education*. September 15, 2020. <https://www.cato.org/publications/study/decentralize-k-12-education> (accessed February 11, 2021).

⁷ Nat Malkus. *American Enterprise Institute: School District Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic: Round 3, Plans for a Remote Finish*. April 2020. <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/School-District-Responses-to-the-COVID-19-Pandemic-Round-3.pdf> (accessed February 11, 2021).

⁸ Jee Deogracias. *EdChoice: Private School COVID-19 Response Survey*. April 2020. <https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Private-School-COVID-19-Response-Survey.pdf> (accessed February 11, 2021).

⁹ Public School Review. *Average Public School Student Size*. 2021. <https://www.publicschoolreview.com/average-school-size-stats/national-data> (accessed February 12, 2021).

students has helped private schools to keep their students in the classroom.¹⁰ Since private schools have less students, smaller class sizes, and larger campuses, it is easier to maintain six feet of social distancing between students. In fact, the National Association of Independent Schools reported that 60% of private schools were operating in person during the pandemic.¹¹ Private schools were better equipped to maintain social distancing while keeping students in the classroom.

On the other hand, public schools have more students and larger class sizes. This has forced public schools across the country to either transition completely to online learning or to implement a hybrid approach. The hybrid approach consists of dividing the school's student body into two groups and alternating in-person instruction with online learning. For example, one half of the student body would attend school Monday and Wednesday, while the other half would have in-person schooling Tuesday and Thursday. On weekdays that students are not in the classroom physically, they have online classes with homework assignments. This approach works for many public schools in Virginia and across the country because it helps to make Covid-19 precautions possible to implement. However, this approach is difficult on teachers and students. Teachers are forced to teach the same material on multiple days to students. This takes longer for teachers to get through their curriculum and presents time restraints that hinder helping struggling students. The approach also creates difficulties for students because their time in the classroom is limited and they have to complete much of their work at home, without easy access to assistance. Overall, the hybrid approach of public schools is effective for maintaining Covid-19 precautions but is not the best teaching methods for students and teachers.

This influx of students out of public school warrants further consideration into school choice initiatives so that education funding can be spent on the type of education students are pursuing. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, student enrollment in private schools was steadily declining.¹² This decline unprioritized school choice initiatives for legislators because the students who would benefit were lessening in number. However, during the Covid-19 pandemic over half of all private schools are seeing an increase in student enrollment. Emily Glickman, President of Abacus Guide Educational Consulting, said at the beginning of the Fall 2020 school year that "There's an explosion of families looking to make a last-minute change."¹³ This urgency of parents looking for in-person schooling for their children, regardless of cost, shows

¹⁰ Private School Review. *Average Private School Student Size*. 2021.

<https://www.privateschoolreview.com/average-school-size-stats/national-data> (accessed February 12, 2021).

¹¹ Jessica Dickler. *CNBC: Families jump to private schools as coronavirus drags on*. November 8, 2020. <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/11/08/coronavirus-why-families-are-jumping-to-private-schools.html> (accessed February 12, 2021).

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

that they are becoming invested in their children's education. As parents get more involved in their children's education, it is clear that school choice is a necessity. Based upon the increasing interest in alternative methods of schooling, educators and legislators must review school choice initiatives and the different proposals for voucher programs or education savings accounts. These education savings accounts and voucher programs would give families access to taxpayer funds that are currently directed to school districts.¹⁴ As students continue to choose private schools over public schools, public funding could be made available for these parents to relieve some of their financial burden. In fact, these school choice funding programs have gathered support from 85% of parents surveyed in a recent EdChoice survey. The survey also showed that school choice is a bipartisan issue with 78% support from both Republicans and Democrats.¹⁵ Legislators should work with parents and educators to reevaluate these school choice initiatives and discuss their potential implementation.

¹⁴ Christopher Ruskowski. *USA Today: American families strongly support school choice*. February 24, 2020. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2020/02/24/voters-strongly-support-school-choice-educators-should-listen-column/4831964002/> (accessed February 13, 2021).

¹⁵ Ibid

Bibliography

- Belsha, Kalyn. *Coronavirus: Who gets to decide how schools work this fall? It's complicated*. May 30, 2020. <https://www.chalkbeat.org/2020/5/29/21275024/who-gets-to-decide-how-schools-work-this-fall-its-complicated> (accessed February 10, 2021).
- Dickler, Jessica. *CNBC: Families jump to private schools as coronavirus drags on*. November 8, 2020. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/11/08/coronavirus-why-families-are-jumping-to-private-schools.html> (accessed February 12, 2021).
- Dorn, Sara. *'Growing body of evidence' shows COVID-19 leaked from Chinese lab: US official*. January 2, 2021. <https://nypost.com/2021/01/02/growing-body-of-evidence-shows-covid-19-leaked-from-chinese-lab-us-official/> (accessed January 28, 2021).
- Groves, Eric. *Alignable: SPECIAL REPORT -- COVID Crisis Relief Needed To Keep Small Business Economy Afloat*. December 10, 2020. <https://www.alignable.com/forum/special-report-covid-crisis-needed-to-keep-small-business-economy> (accessed February 1, 2021).
- Jee Deogracias. *EdChoice: Private School COVID-19 Response Survey*. April 2020. <https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Private-School-COVID-19-Response-Survey.pdf> (accessed February 11, 2021).
- Malkus, Nat. *American Enterprise Institute: School District Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic: Round 3, Plans for a Remote Finish*. April 2020. <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/School-District-Responses-to-the-COVID-19-Pandemic-Round-3.pdf> (accessed February 11, 2021).
- McCluskey, Corey DeAngelis and Neal. *Decentralize K-12 Education*. September 15, 2020. <https://www.cato.org/publications/study/decentralize-k-12-education> (accessed February 11, 2021).
- Private School Review. *Average Private School Student Size*. 2021. <https://www.privateschoolreview.com/average-school-size-stats/national-data> (accessed February 12, 2021).
- Public School Review. *Average Public School Student Size*. 2021. <https://www.publicschoolreview.com/average-school-size-stats/national-data> (accessed February 12, 2021).
- Ruszkowski, Christopher. *USA Today: American families strongly support school choice*. February 24, 2020. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2020/02/24/voters-strongly-support-school-choice-educators-should-listen-column/4831964002/> (accessed February 13, 2021).
- University of Oxford. *Our World in Data: Coronavirus (COVID-19) Deaths*. January 28, 2021. <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-deaths> (accessed January 28, 2021).
- World Health Organization. *Coronavirus Disease 2019 Situation Report-94*. April 23, 2020. https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200423-sitrep-94-covid-19.pdf?sfvrsn=b8304bf0_4 (accessed January 28, 2021).