



(Opinion)

Hey Joe Biden, COVID heroes at Catholic schools show road to reopening

Public-school systems, under the thumb of the teachers' unions, are returning educational inequality to levels not seen since the days of segregation.

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Every afternoon, rain or shine, she stands outside my children's Catholic school, wearing a mask and bearing a megaphone. Her name is Loretta Favret, and she's the school principal. She's memorized every car and what child belongs in it. As cars snake through the carpool line she calls the students by name, and they sprint to cars lined up according to the family's assigned time slot. The kids are released in timed cohorts to minimize crowding and potential cross-cohort contamination in the event of a positive COVID case at school. Some seven months into the school year, there hasn't been a single case yet.

Loretta is a pandemic hero. One among many in Catholic schools across the United States.

Catholic schools fought to stay open

This summer, while local public-school teachers were dumping child-sized body bags on public school grounds at the behest of their union, she had her head down, working quietly to develop a 50-page safety plan to get her students back at their desks. After a six-month hiatus, timed drop-offs and

releases were among countless changes that our teachers and students happily embraced in order to return safely to in-person learning. And our school isn't an anomaly. Rather, it is representative of the courageous approach that Catholic schools nationwide took in the face of a once-in-a-century pandemic.

Catholic schools in all 50 states opened this fall for in-person learning where the local government officials would allow it. And where they would not, parochial schools fought hard for the right to open. Meanwhile, teachers' unions have taken the opposite approach. They've fought every effort to get kids back in school and continually moved the goalposts, despite the facts, science and the increasingly loud and unified voice of the scientific and medical community arguing that kids belong in school. Where I live, not a single public school has opened — apart from for a minute fraction of students in some grades. Not even for children with the most severe of learning disabilities or other challenges such as extreme food insecurity and homelessness.

Public school teachers, despite being placed at the front of the line for the vaccine and successfully pushing to get ahead of independent schoolteachers and daycare workers who have been at their posts for months, are now lobbying local school boards against normal re-opening in the fall. Before they return to the classroom, they want districts to meet fantasy benchmarks like two weeks of zero transmission and total child vaccination. This when vaccine studies have yet to be conducted on children and the timeline to vaccinate adults looks like it will stretch to the end of the year. Their latest demands could mean that the millions of public-school kids who are still out of school might face another year or more of "remote learning."

Schools: In COVID's wake, we need a mandatory mental health curriculum in schools

The data clearly shows that the risks and costs of remote learning, if it can be called that, as well as the risks and costs of isolating children, far outweigh the

risks of COVID. Studies further show that schools simply do not contribute to community spread of the virus. Yet millions of America's children, many of them low-income and among our most vulnerable, languish in digital hell. That is, if they even bother to log in.

The Catholic Church fights for educational equality

But not the children attending Catholic parochial schools. The Catholic Church has long been at the forefront of the fight for education equality in America. Of the nearly two million Catholic school students, 40% live in the inner city and 20% are minorities. Many of these students are not even Catholic. They are children whose parents have sacrificed to rescue them from failing public schools. The Catholic Church happily subsidizes the cost of their schooling, often at a loss. Catholic schools boast graduation rates that are the envy of public schools at a fraction of the per-pupil cost.

Opening schools: *With robust testing, we can open schools this spring before the vaccine is widely available*

The pandemic is now shining a spotlight on Catholic schools' genuine commitment to education — to educational quality and educational equality — while public-school systems, under the thumb of the teachers' unions, are returning educational inequality to levels not seen since the days of segregation. Catholic schools exist not just to provide an excellent education that develops the “whole person,” according to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, but to do so for everyone, including “those families who are poor and disadvantaged, especially in poor inner-city neighborhoods and rural areas.” In this moment of crisis, that has meant stepping into the unknown and opening for all students when almost no one else would.

Nearly a year into the pandemic, Catholic schools have shown the nation how to open safely on a dime. If President Biden wants to make good on his campaign promise to open America's schools within his first 100 days in

office, he might start by sitting down with the heads of America's Catholic schools. I know at least one hero I can recommend, when she's not too busy presiding, masked and megaphoned, over each school day's afternoon pickup.

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<https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2021/02/12/covid-catholic-schools-safely-reopened-follow-their-example-column/4407864001/?fbclid=IwAR2kgR7ozJMjpIQiaqcPpiTOjsQF4I98hvGWAh9PKzWLYBCg41Mz6St6k9w>