



Honey, I Shrunk the School: How Coronavirus is Minifying Education

BY IAN H. PATTERSON • JUNE 2020

Parents of school-aged children are rapidly warming to alternative forms of education in light of coronavirus and distancing measures, new research by Lincoln reveals. As a result, the future is unexpectedly bright for smaller approaches like homeschooling, hybrid models, and microschoools, while traditional public and private schools appear headed for severe setbacks.

(For those new to microschoools, think old fashioned one-room schoolhouses, facilitated by a "guide" or teacher. Hybrid models blend homeschooling with one or more days of weekly classroom instruction.)

Lincoln Studio conducted this national online survey of 458 parents of school-aged children on March 11, 2020.¹

Our findings suggest traditional education models are facing a difficult Catch-22 in the months ahead because of increasingly polarized parent attitudes about coronavirus safety measures and remote learning.



SAFETY

If your child's school re-opened with limited recess, masks and gloves required, distancing, etc, would this make you more or less likely to look for a different school?



ISD and charter parents, n = 360 participants

¹ U.S. participants, ages 18 - 54, were recruited and screened through an online tool. Results are post-stratified. Due to the nature of this survey and small sample size, these findings may not be representative of national views, but may suggest how some parents view education post-COVID.

A Catch-22 for Traditional Models

Distancing is Polarizing

A bullet-point summary of CDC guidelines for reopening schools stirred controversy recently on social media when it pointed out that safety measures like masks, gloves, goggles, no recess, no playgrounds, and six-foot distancing marks on the floor are all recommended.²

Small wonder. Our survey asked parents to watch a short video of these safety measures in operation made by an elementary school principal. We then asked if they'd be more or less likely to leave their child's school, should they impose similar measures. Forty-three percent of public school parents said they were likely to leave, a rate nearly double prior to watching the video (23 percent). Vice versa, a smaller group of 21 percent were more likely to stay, signaling some parents see strong new safety precautions as desirable.

Compared to an April 2020 survey by EdChoice, this finding suggests parents may be getting less

concerned over time about coronavirus risk to their child at school. In April, two-thirds of parents in the EdChoice survey were somewhat or very concerned about their child getting exposed to coronavirus at school, while just 11 percent were not at all concerned.³ Given that 43 percent of parents in our survey don't want CDC safety measures in school, their assessment of coronavirus risks and the tradeoffs for their child may be changing quickly.

Remote Learning Is Turning Off Parents

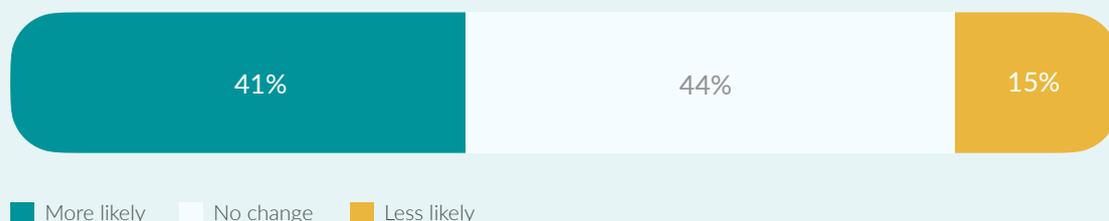
Remote learning is similarly polarizing among public school parents, we found. When asked if they'd be more or less likely to switch should their child's school announce it will offer only remote learning in the fall, 41 percent of public school parents were more likely, while just 15 percent said less likely.

It appears that although 66 percent of public school parents in our survey were favorable toward remote learning as a necessary precaution during the pandemic, a margin of over two-to-one did not see it as an acceptable substitute for in-person instruction for their child in the fall.



REMOTE LEARNING

Would you be more or less likely to switch schools if your child's school announces it will offer only remote learning in the fall?



ISD and charter parents, n = 360 participants

² <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2020/05/22/fact-check-cdc-issues-guidelines-not-rules-reopening-schools/5242249002/>

³ <https://www.edchoice.org/engage/polling-american-k-12-school-parents-about-covid-19/>

Here are some quotes from parents in our survey who were unhappy with remote learning:

"My child is expected to know all of her homework without help from her teachers."

"We live in Florida. The schools are not that great already, but during this it's been just awful. My daughter cries every night, gets frustrated, and the teaching staff is inept at best."

"My child is sad because he says online learning 'sucks.' I also feel that the quality of learning has decreased."

The Catch-22: Dwindling Budgets & Attendance

These findings also suggest public schools are in a bind: comply with CDC distancing guidelines and 43 percent of parents who don't want more safety measures are more likely to withdraw their kids, or

don't comply and risk losing the 21 percent of parents who favor more safety measures. Likewise, if schools heavily leverage remote learning as a stopgap measure, 40 percent of public school parents are likely to withdraw their kids as a result.

Thus, even as school superintendents in 62 cities are predicting cuts of 15 percent - 25 percent and up to 275,000 layoffs due to the economic downturn, schools may also face potentially record declines in attendance even if they avoid the high costs of new safety recommendations.⁴ Class sizes will need to be reduced to as few as 12 students, a reduction of nearly half from the current national average for primary schools of 22 students per classroom.⁵ This implies schools must either reduce instructional hours, or hire more teachers and expand classroom space during a time when they can least afford to do so.

It seems likely, therefore, that schools will default to more remote learning and less classroom time, as in California's Cabrillo Unified District, which recently asked parents if they would prefer either



REMOTE LEARNING

What's your attitude toward remote learning for your child?

66 Percent Favorable

34 Percent Unfavorable



■ Very favorable ■ Somewhat favorable ■ Somewhat unfavorable ■ Very unfavorable

ISD and charter parents, n = 360 participants

⁴<https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2020/05/08/k-12-school-leaders-warn-disaster-huge-coronavirus-related-budget-cuts-layoffs-furloughs-begin/>

⁵ https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/covid19_reopen-america-schools.pdf

just one or two days per week of in-person instruction in the fall.⁶

If, on top of the economic downturn, the considerable share of parents in our survey who are polarized about coronavirus safety measures and remote learning do withdraw their children, public schools could be facing a still larger second wave of funding cuts.

Biggest Winner: Homeschooling

Homeschooling was the biggest winner and most controversial alternative in our survey. An equal share of parents, 31 percent, said they were more likely to choose homeschooling in light of coronavirus as those who said they were less likely.

This aligns with other studies finding parent attitudes have become more favorable toward homeschooling during the pandemic.⁷

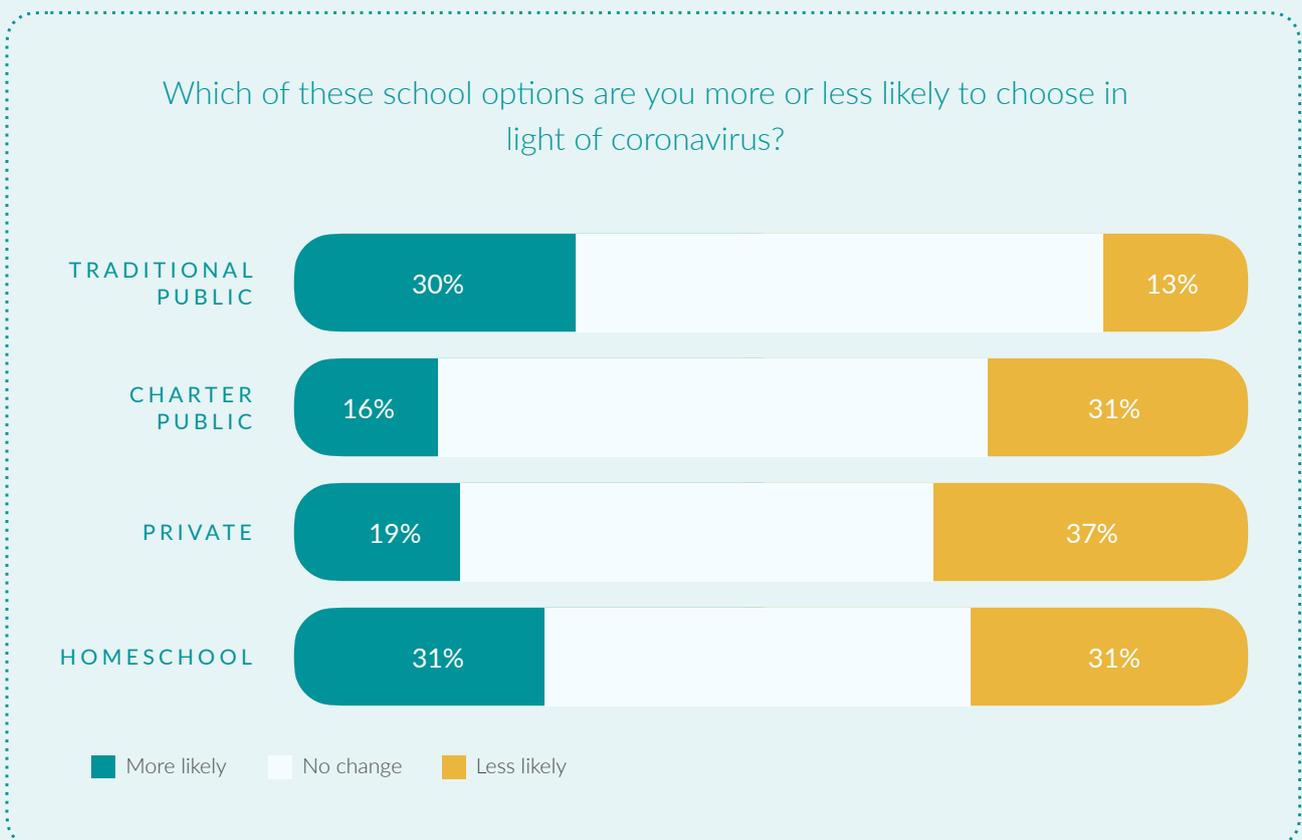
As one parent said: “My child seems to be learning at a better pace [at home] than at school. We are weighing the option of just doing homeschooling permanently.”

Biggest Losers: Private Schools & Charter Public Schools

Public school parents in our survey indicated that coronavirus has reduced their interest in both private schools and charter public schools. Thirty-seven percent of parents said they were now less likely to switch to a private school, with only 19 percent saying more likely. The second biggest loser



PREFERENCE



ISD and charter parents, n = 360 participants

⁶<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSd7K7JQ5ifMxtMwjwIJzfCoVrF-c0uwTlbU97OI7yIIPV9Hzw/viewform>

⁷ <https://www.edchoice.org/engage/polling-american-k-12-school-parents-about-covid-19/>

in our survey due to coronavirus are charter public schools, with 31 percent of parents saying they were less likely to choose a charter and just 16 percent saying they were more likely.

The most common reason parents gave for perceiving private schools as less desirable is related to remote learning. Parents assume all remote learning at any type of school would be similar--which is to say, similarly underwhelming based on our survey data--thereby eroding the competitive advantage of a private school relative to its added cost. As one parent put it "All schools are experimenting with online learning. Another school will not be better nor worse."

Social distancing is another factor parents are taking into account, apparently coming to the conclusion that such measures would limit the advantages of private schools or charter public schools.

“Better the Devil You Know”

When are we likely to see parents take action? Parents in our survey signaled they're standing pat until they know more about coronavirus risks and how schools will respond in the fall, with 49 percent being unlikely to switch in the foreseeable future and 31 percent being likely. This is not surprising given the level of uncertainty parents faced in mid-May, the time of our survey, when many states and counties were still under shelter-in-place orders. Our assessment is that parents are unlikely to take decisive action until they know more about the economic situation and can compare school alternatives--in other words, after schools announce specific plans for safety measures and number of days of classroom instruction for the fall.

As one parent told us, "I'm not sure of how the handling of pandemics [by other schools] would be better, and a new school could possibly be worse." Others see changing schools as difficult, especially when they believe it requires moving: "It's hard to change schools... that requires moving and times are uncertain."

Discussion of Opportunities

Homeschooling, hybrid models, and microschools are positioned to grow rapidly as a result of the coronavirus pandemic because traditional models--and especially public schools--are caught between the diverging parent preferences that these smaller models can more easily accommodate.

We see a number of new opportunities in light of these findings.

New Matching & Discovery Platforms

In partnership with *The Miles Foundation*, our own *Lincoln Studio* recently launched *Schoolahoop*, a free product that matches kids with nearby school alternatives based on parent intuition about their needs and interests. *Schoolahoop* is currently in initial beta testing in Tarrant County, Texas.

In response to these survey findings, the *Schoolahoop* team immediately began working to include alternative education options in its matching algorithm, including homeschooling, microschools, and all-remote charters. The team expects to deploy this enhancement in the weeks ahead.

A *Care.com* for Teachers

The single biggest obstacle parents face to forming new microschools. Apart from lack of awareness about this option, it is hard to find other like-minded parents and hire a guide.

The timing seems right as more educators are potentially available than ever. A recent survey found that one in five public school teachers were considering quitting this year.⁸ Private school teachers are facing layoffs. Many others sufficiently qualified to tutor, teach, or guide children are unemployed because of the economic crisis.

A platform that matches like-minded parents in the same area with educators for hire could have an impact on adoption.

⁸ <https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/news-polls/usa-today-teachersparents-covid>

A Meetup for Homeschool Co-Ops

A similar problem exists for parents new to the idea of homeschooling. To use an analogy, more parents might consider joining a wagon train to the frontier of homeschooling than would consider an intimidating solo journey. Homeschooling cooperatives are that wagon train—a way multiple families can join forces and share teaching responsibilities, making home education more accessible.

A new online platform connecting like-minded parents who want to participate in these homeschooling co-ops could fill this important gap.

“What’s My School Spending?” Quiz

Parent attitudes about public school spending are changing as school services decrease due to the coronavirus pandemic.

These schools are shifting the considerable costs of weekday education and childcare to parents as a result of closures, remote learning, and reduced hours of instruction. Meanwhile, public schools continue to receive the same funding for doing less, even as parents must do more without any financial help. This dynamic is leading many parents to question the fairness of education funding, some for the first time.

We think an entertaining, interactive quiz that challenges parents to guess how much their school really spends per pupil could tap into the parents’ newly heightened sense of fairness and win converts to the idea that funding should follow students. The results could also show comparisons with the cost-effectiveness of alternatives like homeschooling, alongside the idea of Education Savings Accounts (ESA) as a way of letting funding follow students. Because parents routinely underestimate what public schools spend, the results will be unexpected and a quiz like this could generate social buzz.⁹

Ideas like this are feasible for the first time thanks to a recent federal reporting requirement under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) that states must provide per-pupil expenditure estimates for each school.¹⁰

Recent polling by EdChoice also appears to support this concept. School parents informed of actual per-pupil spending are half as likely to think funding is too low when compared to parents without this information. In other words, seeing those numbers clearly makes a difference. Additionally, the poll suggests informed parents may be growing more skeptical about school funding post-pandemic. Thirty-eight percent of informed parents thought funding was too low in February 2020. That number has fallen to just 26 percent as of May 2020.¹¹

⁹ <https://freopp.org/americans-think-schools-lack-funding-but-new-spending-reports-will-open-eyes-60b655c11c35>

¹⁰ <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2018/08/09/what-is-essas-new-school-spending-transparency-requirement.html>

¹¹ <https://edchoice.morningconsultintelligence.com/assets/33471.pdf>