



MATT WEBER

A Fertile Period for Education Reform?

The unexpected effects of politics, the pandemic, and racial awakening

HAVE AMERICA'S SCHOOLS ever faced greater uncertainty? As this issue of *Education Next* goes to press, local officials are wrestling with whether and how to resume in-person instruction amid rising Covid-19 case counts, the start of flu season, and the threat of a second viral wave. Educational institutions are remaking themselves in response to the racial reckoning that followed the death of George Floyd in the custody of Minneapolis Police in May. Even the U.S. Supreme Court, whose rulings shape policy on affirmative action, government funding for religious schools, and more, is in transition, following the death of Ruth Bader Ginsburg and the nomination of Amy Coney Barrett.

Meanwhile, the results of the November 2020 national elections could fundamentally alter the direction of federal education policy. While most eyes are understandably fixed on the campaign for the White House, many important education issues will hinge on which party ends up with a majority in the Senate. Unified Democratic control in Washington could mean the end of the filibuster—and with that change, a radical shift in what's possible politically. A major increase in federal spending on K–12 schools, long considered beyond the realm of political feasibility, could quickly become a reality. A Trump second term with Justice Barrett on the bench, on the other hand, would bring its own disruptions.

For some practitioners who chose education as a career in part because of the stability—steady pay, lifetime tenure, a predictable seasonal schedule—this climate of uncertainty may provoke anxiety. The upside for students and parents, though, is that all the dynamism has the potential to force some changes on a system that has long resisted reform.

There are already signs that families' tastes and choices are shifting amid the pandemic. The 2020 *Education Next* survey of public opinion, the results of which we report in this issue, finds that 73 percent of parents now say they are willing to have their child take some high school courses via the Internet—a jump of 17 percentage points over 2009. In the What Next column, Michael Horn describes the rise of “pandemic pods,” informal arrangements in which parents cooperate to either home-school or support distance learning for their own children and those of neighbors.

The disruption of in-person instruction also seems to have

provided an opportunity for the charter-school sector to distinguish itself. Our survey reveals that when schools were forced to close their buildings, charter schools pivoted more effectively than their district counterparts, offering a more robust program of remote instruction and producing higher levels of parental satisfaction. Elsewhere in the issue, Michael McShane reports on how charter schools managed by for-profit firms—a breed often singled out for criticism by politicians on the left—were particularly agile in reacting to the coronavirus. Looking at a longer time horizon, M. Danish Shakeel and Paul E. Peterson use national data to reveal that, since 2005, achievement levels have been rising faster in the charter sector than in the district sector, with especially large gains for Black students at charters.

As policymakers, practitioners, and parents navigate an education landscape reshaped by politics, the pandemic, and the racial awakening, they'll do better if their decisions are informed by rigorous research. We offer for consideration here a clever experiment by David Quinn that shows how requiring teachers to use a rubric can eliminate racial bias in the evaluation of student work, as well as a pathbreaking new study by C. Kirabo Jackson and his colleagues linking social-emotional learning in high schools to long-term success. The issue also carries an extended report by our Legal Beat columnist, Joshua Dunn, on the frontiers of religious-freedom litigation under the Supreme Court's landmark ruling, earlier this year, in the case of *Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue*.

The effects of widespread school closures on student achievement are already the subject of countless projections and will be a topic for much future research. Another interesting question is whether parent and student frustration at school closures, and the exposure of union political power during the debate over reopening, will yield lasting change. When historians look back, they may find that one of the most fertile periods for education reform was a time when many schools were not even physically open.

Martin West

MISSION STATEMENT In the stormy seas of school reform, this journal will steer a steady course, presenting the facts as best they can be determined, giving voice (without fear or favor) to worthy research, sound ideas, and responsible arguments. Bold change is needed in American K-12 education, but *Education Next* partakes of no program, campaign, or ideology. It goes where the evidence points.
