

The Great Unbundling

Is the parents' rights movement opening a new frontier in school choice?

THE MINDSETS OF PARENTS are changing—rapidly—as they make decisions about the schooling of their children. Over the past few years, a convergence of two megatrends—pandemic desperation and parental-rights politics—has driven many families to reconsider the traditional school model and find ways of “unbundling” their children’s schooling into discrete elements that are controlled by the parent rather than the school.

While parent-led unbundling is not a new phenomenon, the current movement has expanded so quickly that it’s been dubbed “the Great Unbundling” of K–12 schooling.

The traditional K–12 schooling model is a “bundled” product that provides parents with an all-in-one package of services: instruction, transportation, lunch, extracurriculars, and athletics, all delivered by one provider in one location: the school. Historically, parental choice has been limited to selecting from among different schools—neighborhood, magnet, or, for those with the means, private schools. In the 1990s, states started passing legislation that defined school choice in these “whole school” terms, with charters, vouchers, and scholarships providing families with alternatives to schools operated by their local district.

In response to the widespread school closures sparked by the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020, many parents opted for a pick-and-choose, customized approach to schooling that they hoped could fill gaps in the remote

learning opportunities their local districts were providing.

While pandemic desperation may have catalyzed the Great Unbundling, a burgeoning “parents’ rights” movement has propelled it forward. This movement has emerged as a potent political force in many states and school districts, as parents assert that they have a right to opt out of individual components of their schools’ curricula and substitute learning materials and experiences that are aligned with their own values and beliefs. In a nation that is divided over cultural and partisan values, many parents who object to school programs and materials related to race, gender identity, sexuality, evolution, and the interpretation of history are choosing to substitute curricula that reflect their own views.

The Great Unbundling is now influencing the education marketplace, as a broad set of nonschool vendors have responded to this unprecedented demand by pitching their education services directly to families: “microschools,” online courses, private tutoring, learning pods, and outdoor learning experiences. A family might purchase reading instruction from Sylvan, world language instruction from Rosetta Stone, math tutoring from Kumon, and a physical education course from the local YMCA, while having the whole package curated by an organization such as Coursemojo.

In the view of many school leaders, unbundling is not simply a temporary phenomenon driven by the exigencies

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of the pandemic. Monishae O’Neill, principal of the Elementary Academy at the Drew Charter School in Atlanta, sees unbundling as an integral part of her school’s program. “Unbundling definitely became a necessity for our school during the Covid-19 quarantine of 2020,” O’Neill said, “and although we’ve now transitioned back to in-person learning, unbundling has remained at our school in various forms.”

Parent-Led Phenomenon

Unbundling has been with us for a long time. Upper-income families, even those opting for public schools, have for generations supplemented their children’s

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education with afterschool enrichment programs—ballet, karate, tutoring, museum trips, music lessons, and more. Education writers such as Rick Hess and Tom Vander Ark have long highlighted the potential for schools and districts to unbundle their programming to better serve their communities.

However, what is undeniably new about the Great Unbundling is that it is a parent-led, demand-driven phenomenon that has exploded into prominence because of the choices and decisions of parents in communities across the country. There were no master plans from district superintendents; no mandates from state education secretaries; no edicts from the U.S. Department of Education. The trend has been directly fueled by parents demanding the ability to unbundle their children’s education. State legislators and the schooling marketplace were driven to respond.

In community after community, a powerful set of market dynamics drove the ascendancy of the Great Unbundling. Initially they arose from the demand side of the market, with parents seeking out new types of providers. The supply side of the market responded with new models, new services, and increased capabilities to meet burgeoning parent demand (see Table 1).

Unbundling has affected all sectors of the schooling marketplace: private schools, charter schools, and district-operated public schools. In the early months of the pandemic, unbundling was most pronounced among upper-income families that had the resources to purchase supplemental services in much the same way home-schooling parents have always done. However, as the pandemic wore on, more families from all socioeconomic groups began to see unbundling as a means of enhancing and improving their children’s education.

Caprice Young, a former president of the Los Angeles Unified School District board and now president of the consulting firm Education Growth Group, sees today’s unbundling as an expansion of an existing trend. “While unbundling existed before the pandemic, it completely exploded during the pandemic as parents paid attention—sometimes for the first time—to new options for

Market Forces Driving Unbundling

(Table 1)

The Great Unbundling of K–12 schooling has rapidly emerged over the past few years, driven by unprecedented demand by parents wanting a different and broader set of curricular programming for their children. New models and services then emerged from the marketplace to meet those needs as discrete alternatives to traditional programs offered in local schools.

DEMAND SIDE TRENDS

Widespread parent anxiety, frustration, or desperation over their child’s schooling.

More parents working from home and being present in the child’s school day.

The rise of “parental rights” politics in many states.

More families moving to rural or remote locations.

Broader parent acceptance of online instruction and other tools.

Rapid increases in student users during the pandemic, increasing the scale of companies’ operations.

SUPPLY SIDE TRENDS

Maturing of the technological capabilities and product quality at many ed-tech companies.

Dramatic expansion of Education Savings Accounts providing public funding of educational services.

School districts seeking alternative models to meet parents’ or students’ needs.

Strong availability of investor capital in the ed-tech sector.



NEW ENGLAND SCIENCE & SAILING

Students study green crabs up close in New London, Connecticut, with the New England Science and Sailing Foundation’s travel program. Such opportunities are becoming more accessible substitutes to traditional classroom instruction as part of “the Great Unbundling.”

their child’s education,” Young said.

Education service providers responded to the surge in parent demand for supplementary, unbundled services by expanding their programs. Eric Isselhardt, CEO of the New England Science and Sailing Foundation in Connecticut, has seen demand for the organization’s programming grow dramatically. “The unbundling phenomenon of the past few years has brought new families and new students into our programs, driving us to expand our operations and direct relationships with parents,” he said.

The Politics of “Parents’ Rights”

The scope and scale of the Great Unbundling have been fueled and shaped by a sharp rise in parents’ asserting their “rights” to directly control discrete elements of their children’s education. Increasingly, parents are claiming the right to opt out of individual components of a school’s curriculum and substitute learning materials that are aligned with their values, while keeping their children enrolled in school.

Controversies over critical race theory, evolution, sex education, gender identity, testing and grading, and other topics have driven parents to demand changes in their schools’ programs or exclude their children from them. In the 2022 survey of the American School District Panel, a standing group of school district and charter management organization leaders, 51 percent of respondents reported that parent or community polarization around controversial topics was interfering with their ability to educate students. School districts have been overwhelmed with Freedom of Information requests related to curriculum content, and school boards have fielded communications from a variety of parent advocacy groups.

The first stirrings of the parents’ rights movement predate Covid, and the phenomenon was founded in legal and political motivations rather than the pandemic. In 2021 and 2022, gubernatorial races in Virginia, Florida, and Arkansas as well as local schoolboard elections

elsewhere became major battlegrounds for parental-rights warfare. Depending on one’s point of view, the parents’ agenda was cast either as an attempt to roll back diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts or as a drive to defeat a “woke” education agenda in favor of traditional values. Conservative schoolboard candidates in several major districts gained majorities in last fall’s elections with the support of parents’ rights groups such as Moms with Liberty, an organization based in Florida.

In many ways, the politics of parents’ rights can be viewed as an outgrowth of the hyper-partisan culture wars that are playing out in our national civic dialogue. However, it is also a reflection of a growing value-pluralism among parents, who differ widely in which narratives and experiences they want to see reflected in their children’s education.

State Legislative Response

State policymakers, apparently recognizing the power of the Great Unbundling, have responded with major changes in proposed school-choice legislation. Legislatures across the country have moved quickly away from “whole-school” choice legislation (charters, vouchers, and tax credits) and toward “unbundled” choice legislation in the form of the universal Education Savings Account, or ESA. While there are many state-to-state permutations in such legislation, an ESA is essentially an annual flexible-spending allocation for each eligible child based on a percentage of a state’s

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per-pupil expenditure—as high as 97.5 percent in states such as Florida, Arizona, and West Virginia. ESAs are a powerful tool for parents in unbundling and customizing their children’s schooling.

The growth in ESA programs has given more parents opportunities to unbundle their children’s education by providing them with the financial means to customize educational experiences based on their own values and perceived needs. The universal-access provisions of this funding stream mean that lower-income families now have access to the benefits of unbundling that were previously available only to affluent families.

The past year alone has seen a decisive shift in state legislatures away from vouchers, scholarships, and tax credits to pay for tuition at private schools and toward ESAs that allow parents to purchase discrete services from multiple education providers. The scorecard for the 2023 legislative session across states is striking (see Table 2).

State ESA programs enacted over the past few years have dramatically expanded the number of students eligible to participate in the ESAs as compared to earlier versions. At first, ESAs were mostly targeted at narrow populations such as special needs students, children in failing schools, or those from lower-income families. More recently, ESA programs have increasingly expanded participation to all students, and the accounts are professionally managed, as Health Savings Accounts (HSA) are.

For example, West Virginia and Arizona passed universal ESA programs in 2022, while Iowa and Utah expanded eligibility to every child in 2023. In West Virginia, 93 percent of the state’s 295,000 public school students are eligible to participate. In contrast, New Hampshire’s

School Choice Bills Introduced in 2023

(Table 2)

In the past year, state legislatures have responded to the demand for greater parental control over educational programming by eschewing the expansion of voucher programs and tax credits in favor of Education Savings Accounts (ESAs). The amount of new legislation favoring ESAs is nearly quadruple the number of such programs that are already in place.

	EXISTING PROGRAMS	NEW PROGRAMS PROPOSED
Voucher Programs	26	6
Scholarship/Tuition Tax Credits	26	11
Education Savings Account (ESA)	13	51

NOTE: Numbers current as of May 2023.

SOURCE: American Federation for Children

program, adopted several years earlier, was keyed solely to families with incomes up to 300 percent above the poverty level, which means only 31 percent of children statewide are eligible.

Scott Jensen, former speaker of the Wisconsin State Assembly and now an executive at the American Federation for Children, has seen firsthand the legislative impact of parent demand for unbundled schooling. “For more than two decades, school choice advocates like me have had to work hard to explain the benefits of choice programs to parents,” Jensen said. “For the past two years, we have been running as fast as we can just to keep up with parents demanding a greater say over every aspect of their children’s education.”

As a result of the increased number of state programs and their universal participation guidelines, ESAs are undergoing explosive growth in student participation that is expected to mushroom further as more states join the ESA trend. The high participation rates in the “early adopter” states may well induce more states to create ESA

programs, driving greater levels of participation in the unbundling movement in the coming years (see Figure 1).

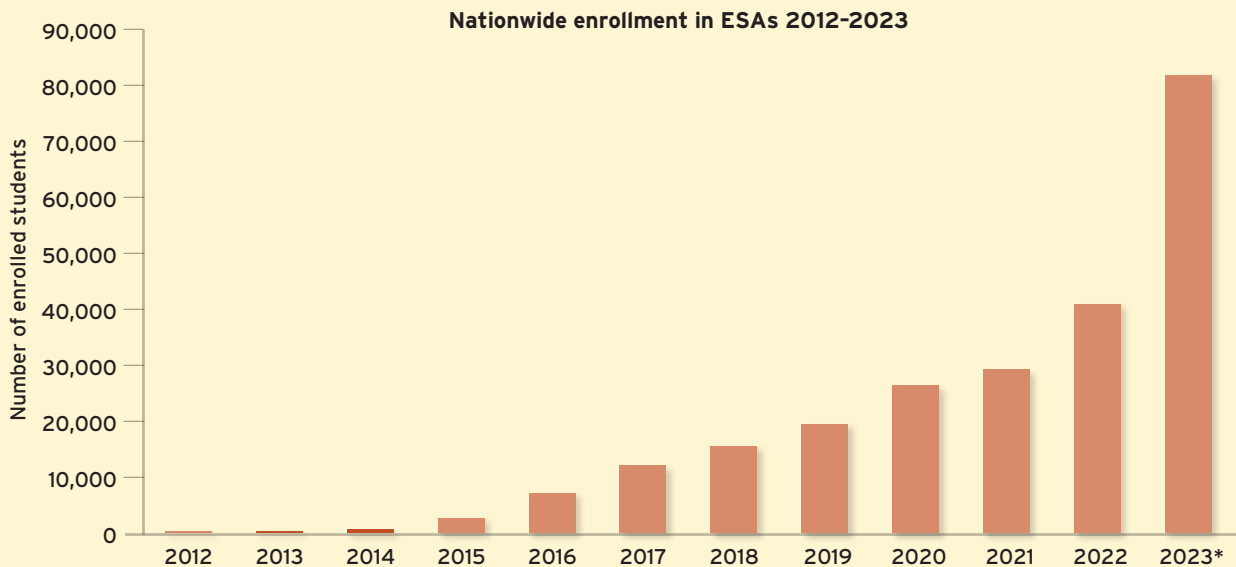
School District Response

The Great Unbundling’s volatile combination of parent desperation and parental-rights politics has sent a shockwave radiating across the school district landscape, challenging many core tenets of the traditional K–12 school model. As unbundling gains energy and influence, we believe that it has the potential to drive schools and districts to deliver much more individualized structuring of the schooling experience, reflecting greater degrees of flexibility and personalization.

The unbundling premise holds intuitive appeal, since each family can customize their child’s education, choosing from an array of program providers. That degree of flexibility holds the prospect of improving publicly funded education while also addressing preferences based on values, needs, and interests. If parents could opt out of some programs offered by their public school in favor

ESA Enrollment Growth (Figure 1)

With the expansion of ESA programs in states that have enacted the accounts, the number of enrolled students doubled from 2022 to 2023. This high rate of participation in places like West Virginia, Arizona, and Iowa could provide the incentive other states need to adopt their own ESA programs.



*Enrollment as of May 2023

SOURCE: American Federation for Children

of programs provided elsewhere, the competition over supplying the most effective robotics or language or math course could raise quality, elevate best practices, drive innovation, and stretch the boundaries of the school day.

Imagine local public schools offering à la carte services to students in private schools, charter schools, and home-schools, allowing them to play on athletic teams, participate in extracurriculars and the arts, take AP classes, and partake of other academic offerings and afterschool programs. Every school might not be great in everything, but each school would need to be good in something to attract a market niche and survive. Time-pressed parents would need unbundling to be convenient, easy, and accessible; we don't believe this can happen equitably for all students and their families without the participation of public schools.

Unfortunately, the dominant response to date from most school-district leaders and institutional stakeholders—including the National School Boards Association and the American Association of School Superintendents—has largely been to push back on unbundling and the parents' rights movement, discrediting them on moral or policy grounds while offering training to school leaders on the proactive management of controversies.

District leaders point to the annual PDK Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools, which continues to suggest that most parents are quite happy with their child's local public school. These leaders say that the finding casts the ESA-enabled unbundling trend, despite its growth, as a niche phenomenon. They also point out that the expertise and resources of district-operated schools far exceed the capacity of the market of nonpublic providers in many critical areas, such as special education and teaching English as a second language (ESL)—programs that generally require significant resources.

As schools and districts face increasing parent demands for customized schooling models, they will be called on to serve as both enablers and gatekeepers of the unbundling phenomenon in their local communities. It remains to be seen if their operations will have the agility, robustness, and competitiveness needed to participate in unbundling; however, we know that districts do respond to funding requirements, enrollment decline, and changes in state policy.

Reconciling Choice and Equity

The traditional American "common school model" has been central to the structure of our K–12 school systems since the 19th century. From a 2023 policy perspective, a fundamental question is whether (and how) this well-established model can adapt to an unbundling phenomenon driven by the intensification of value pluralism.

Should we consider unbundling as simply a more atomized version of school choice, one that allows parents to choose discrete programs for their children, rather than a single-school option, based on their personal values and perceived needs? That is, is it a natural extension of the charter school and voucher movements of the past 30 years? Or should we consider the Great Unbundling as a fraying of the common school model that has been a pillar of the American education system for more 150 years? Does the à la carte nature of unbundling move us away from a collective national character in favor of individual liberty? Does any public-policy

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avenue exist to accommodate both and avoid a disruptive fight for control of public education?

Generation after generation, the American K–12 common school model, while imperfect, has shown itself to be remarkably resilient and adaptable in the face of dramatic cultural and societal changes. Racial integration came about in response to *Brown v. Board of Education*, girls' opportunities expanded because of Title IX, ESL programming was developed in response to immigration, special education services were ramped up in response to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. All of these and more have driven school districts to change and adapt their operations (albeit insufficiently in many cases).

Since 1974, when historian David Tyack chronicled "the one best system" in his book of the same name, the common school model has made significant adaptations to larger policy changes: the standards movement of the 1990s, with every state adopting common standards and assessments; the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, requiring disaggregated student-performance data by subgroups, including racial and ethnic; the equity

movement of the 2000s, driving an evolution from equality of opportunity toward equity of outcomes. However, while these policy initiatives were based on changes in function, the unbundling of education will require changes in the *form* of public education.

In theory, equitable academic achievement for all students can be fostered in an education system that accommodates differing family preferences and beliefs in a pluralistic society; state-adopted standards can be taught through multiple content and different venues. The Great Unbundling will demand adaptation of the common school model and our methods of funding it. But we believe that the unbundling of education services by public schools may offer the best hope for accommodating pluralism while simultaneously advancing the achievement of all students.

Policy Prescription

If the Great Unbundling is to succeed—that is, become a positive force rather than a divisive alternative or fad—the active participation of public education leaders at both the state and district levels is essential. Implementing broad-scale unbundling while also achieving equity needs the cooperation of the largest, most dominant segment of the schooling market: district-operated public schools.

As former urban school-district superintendents, we believe that choice and competition among schools in a robust education marketplace motivates everyone to improve. Both of us have succeeded in using market-based tools to help students close achievement gaps, so we know firsthand that school districts do have the ability to harness solutions that rely on both equity and choice to improve public education. While ESAs are a robust public-policy mechanism for the next generation of educational choice, an equitable, inclusive version of education customized by parents is only possible, in our view, through a menu of choices that include the programs, courses, and learning experiences offered by district-operated schools.

While logistical constraints abound, there are several policy tools readily available to state and district leaders to support the educational promise of the Great Unbundling. We offer the following policy prescription for education policy leaders who seek to embrace the energy and opportunities of unbundling while also staying committed to the principles of educational equity and academic achievement for all students.

State Policies

Protect participation of high-needs students. State ESA policies should be expanded to ensure families have access to the funding sources generated by their students’

participation in the ESA. Eligible funding sources should include those that are required by law and funded categorically through state and federal grants—special education, compensatory education mandated by Title 1 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, services to English language learners, and the National School Lunch Program. The inclusion of these sources in the ESA funds made available to an individual family would eliminate the need to provide special “scholarships” or to “weight” ESA allotments by need. Access to these aggregated resources would enable the most underserved families to customize and improve other aspects of their child’s education.

Embrace partial enrollment. State school-finance formulas should be modified to include partial enrollment in public schools. Enrollment in school districts to access state funding should be cumulative, a sum of full-time and part-time enrollment in each school, like the current enrollment reporting of full-time students. This would enable students to participate in some classes or programs at their local public school and take advantage of offerings from private providers.

Control the quality of providers. States should create organizational mechanisms for ensuring the quality of service providers and enforcing performance standards. State approval of both nonprofit and for-profit education service providers would allow for some quality control over the marketplace. The active monitoring and accreditation of education service providers would enable states to create clearinghouses of approved vendors for families.

Modify state attendance laws to promote mastery, not seat time. The personalization inherent in unbundling requires flexibility of time and variation in individual student learning rates. Time and instruction must vary if mastery of standards is the constant; prescribed hours of classroom instruction, summer school, and afterschool tutoring may be necessary for some students to master the content in a given course. States should develop end-of-course exams and allow flexibility in how long individual students are given to master such courses, whenever and wherever they take them.

District Policies

Redefine enrollment, attendance, and participation. Districts need to adjust their operations to accommodate part-time attendance and program participation. Courses, programs, services, and other activities should be capitated, with tuition charges payable through the ESA by the parent holding the ESA grant. A truly universal ESA grant would award each student the amount needed to attend a public school full time. Students who opt for public school could seek an alternative to a course

the district is offering or look for additional courses.

Determine the cost of all district offerings on a per-pupil basis. A school district will need to calculate a per-pupil cost for its courses, programs, and activities, based on the direct costs for personnel, materials, and related overhead. Conceptually, the sum of these costs should equal the annual per-pupil funding a family would receive through their ESA. Course and credit-hour tuition charges, which are widely used in colleges and other forms of post-secondary education, provide a model for capitation of individual courses and programs.

Use unbundling to increase market share and improve quality. According to parents' responses to the 2022 *Education Next* survey of public opinion, enrollment in schools operated by public school districts declined by nearly two million students (or 4 percent) between 2020 and 2022. Unbundling offers school districts the opportunity to offset this enrollment loss by marketing discrete

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courses and programs to parents of homeschooled students and private-school parents as well as parents who become eligible for state-funded ESAs. Outreach to ESA families through regional enrollment service centers could expand the choice marketplace and provide public schools with more inclusive participation, enabling them to serve more students and broaden their base of support.

Unbundle the role of educators to help sustain them in teaching. The post-pandemic role of teachers and school administrators has become unmanageable, with teachers leaving the profession and school districts struggling to fill vacancies with high-quality candidates. Unbundling would allow schools to unpack the myriad tasks that are now bundled together and reassemble them in partnership with other providers in areas such as attendance, remediation, enrichment, mental health services, counseling, technology, and security. Unbundling programs and services would liberate teachers to focus their energies on their core role of instruction.

Future of Unbundling

The Great Unbundling creates enormous challenges and opportunities for K–12 school systems. While the policy debates of the past 30 years have focused on allowing families to choose from among schools, unbundling transcends this whole-school definition of choice to enable parents to atomize and customize the education of their children. Moving from a one-size-fits-all school model to a customized one has the potential to foster greater achievement and equity.

We expect that broad-based change toward an unbundled form of public education will be slow and incremental, with many policy kinks to work out. We anticipate administrative resistance and pushback from teachers unions as well as doctrinaire opposition from the institutional establishment to weakening the common school model. In short, unbundling will attract political opposition from all the groups typically in support of “the one best system” of batch learning and against market-driven choice and parental control.

Nevertheless, we believe that unbundling school choice would provide better benefits to all students over the long term, giving parents greater freedom than they have with whole-school choice alone. A system that allows families to opt in and out of specific school programs may prove to be less divisive than one in which stakeholders continually vie for political and policy control. The unbundling of K–12 education would also enable public schools—district-operated and charter—to serve more members of their community and be more inclusive across racial, ethnic, gender, income, and partisan lines.

At this point, no one knows how much demand there will be for unbundling, or if most parents will use their ESAs as they would a voucher—that is, to send their children to private school. In our view, this would be a missed opportunity. In a society that has become more diverse and pluralistic, a new generation of school choice is needed—one that moves beyond simple whole-school models of choice toward a robust system of unbundled education programs. Imagine a school system in which all parents—not just some—had the right to choose from among an array of services that meet their child's interests and needs, consistent with their family's values and circumstances.

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