

Editorial: We must not use students as leverage in public policy

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Students need to receive education in the fall. They don't need to be used as leverage in political and economic disputes.

Reopening schools with students returning to in-person instruction in August is, for policymakers, a critical part of shoring up the economy.

With the 2020-21 school year approaching, national, state and local officials are issuing guidance and requirements for returning to instruction in the fall. Students are at the center of those announcements, but not in the way they should be.

World

On Monday, the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency announced [international students](#) “attending schools operating entirely online may **not** take a full online course load and remain in the United States.”

This announcement comes amid efforts by the Trump administration to restrict legal and illegal immigration and is seen, by many, against that backdrop. Seen this way, one might wonder if international students are being used as part of a broader strategy unrelated to education.

The economic impact to universities that could stand to lose significant revenue from international students who “[often pay full tuition](#)” points to that larger strategy. On its surface, it seems crass and cynical to pressure

schools to return to on-campus, in-person instruction by threatening their bottom line using international students.

Nation

Education Secretary [Betsy DeVos](#) on Tuesday praised a Florida education commissioner's plan for its expectation that "all students would be able to be back in school in person, five days a week." His plan gives schools latitude for dealing with "special situations," but DeVos did not specify those special situations.

DeVos then criticized an "elite" suburban school district outside Washington, D.C., saying it offered "as a way to start school again" the choice of "zero days a week for your child to be in school or two days a week." She did not specify if the days offered were in-person only or in combination with days of online instruction.

After saying 90 percent of public funding comes from state and local sources, DeVos was asked how seriously she is looking at withholding federal funds from schools that do not open. She said her department is looking at the situation "very seriously."

What isn't so clear at this point is if school districts will risk losing funds by offering five days a week of online instruction. What is clear is [President Trump's commitment](#) to "put pressure on governors and everybody else to open the schools," claiming some "think it's gonna be good for them politically, so they keep the schools closed."

People at the local level don't seem concerned about politics, as Trump uses the word. They seem concerned about the health, welfare and education of their children.

State

In Texas, officials have been deliberating what will be required when public schools reopen in the fall. Local school districts are working through the details left open to them by the Texas Education Agency, who [released additional guidance on July 7](#).

A key concern was that TEA—which itself is under “a [mandatory telework policy](#) for agency employees”—would withhold funding from local school districts if students were learning virtually rather than in-person. However, according to the most recent guidance, TEA will count students in virtual instruction as part of on-campus attendance.

For the time being, Texas public schools do not seem to have that specific funding worry hanging over their heads, though other funding worries continue.

Whether globally, nationally or locally, education is a key concern, and rightfully so. Unfortunately, the fact education is so important plays into the hands of those who want to steer or force policy.

Letting go of leverage

More important than the economic impact to universities of barring international students from fully online instruction is the social, mental and spiritual impact such a policy will have on those students. For starters, it communicates international students are some kind of problem.

Followers of Jesus should be the first to reject such a message. In place of ICE’s latest policy, followers of Jesus should be at the front of the class finding ways to welcome international students.

A similar message is being sent to our children and youth. Like parents who

use their children as leverage in their marital disputes, political factions are pressing their agendas using our kids.

Followers of Jesus should be the first to reject these crass and cynical efforts. In contrast to them, followers of Jesus should be at the forefront of ensuring all children receive a quality education—on-campus or online.

People need education, regardless of the condition of our economy. And that education should not teach children, youth and international students they are at the center and the source of our problems.

Instead, that education should teach them how creative, compassionate and courageous people face the real issues directly and work together to overcome them. Followers of Jesus should be at the front of the classroom on that.

Thankfully, there are many followers of Jesus—at every level of education—investing their lives in that kind of teaching. Let's get behind them and join with them—for the sake of our communities, for the sake of our children and for the glory of God our Creator.

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