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An Idea For This Moment: Districts Can Pay Families To Help Get Students And Schools Back On Track

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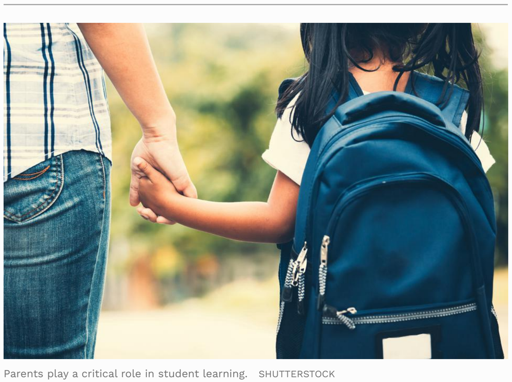

Parents play a critical role in student learning. SHUTTERSTOCK

Many school districts are right now facing overwhelming challenges. Students have fallen far behind. Many are disengaged. And labor shortages are throwing a wrench in everything from food services to transportation, and making it harder to initiate new efforts like tutoring that could get kids up to speed. These challenges are compounded in districts serving the neediest students.

One thing many districts serving high-poverty students do have: money.

That's because the largest shares of federal relief aid went to the highest-poverty districts, many of which received well over $6,000 per student.

Perhaps this is why some districts are considering a novel approach to solving the most immediate challenges: **Using a share of district relief dollars to pay families for taking on a role in getting students and schools back on track.**

Take for example the hundreds of districts that pivoted quickly this fall to address their transportation problems by paying willing parents to get their own kids to school. Payments go beyond bus fare, to the tune of $300 a month in Portland, OR, and Philadelphia; $1,000 for the year in Camden, NJ; and $1,000 upfront plus $500 a month in Chicago.

It's not just transportation. Some districts are sending cash to families as a way to address other critical recovery needs.

There are districts paying teens to take summer courses, to make sure they are on target to graduate. There are districts sending cash to families to shop for their own school supplies. Hoping to reduce time spent in quarantines, lots of districts are paying students to get COVID vaccinations (here and here too).

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But let's be honest, writing checks to families goes against the grain for most districts. Typically, districts stay strictly in the lane of using their funds to hire staff who then provide services to students. That explains how districts have gone from employing one staff member for every 14 students in 1970 to one for every eight students today.

But frankly, the extreme challenges facing schools right now create an imperative that districts get beyond business as usual and consider ideas like tapping and paying families, especially for tasks that matter to students' learning.

Where math outcomes suffered during the pandemic (sadly, that's most districts), districts could use their relief funds to pay parents to make sure kids spend 20 minutes four times a week on an online math tutoring software (like Khan Academy). Or to build reading skills, districts could pay families to spend 20 minutes each night reading with their younger kids. Where districts are struggling to ensure all students have access to needed recovery services (like tutoring), enlisting parents to help might reduce the burden on district-provided services.

These kinds of moves offer districts the chance to re-engage students and parents, partnering with them to help solve problems that directly affect them. In cases where the pandemic frayed the bonds between school and family, finding ways to send the neediest families a share of that money can help rebuild that relationship, and do so in a way that reestablishes expectations. In addition to getting homework done or reading together, a district could pay parents to attend parent conferences, or to ensure their kids get adequate sleep and show up on time.

While the idea may be foreign to many in education, using public money to align families with a common goal for students isn't some untested pandemic-era invention. It's a well-documented concept called co-production where the beneficiaries of a service participate in the delivery of the services they consume.

It's what motivated San Francisco's kindergarten-to-college program, where public money goes into an account in the student's name, setting family expectations of college going, which, in turn, improves the student's academic trajectory. California is now upping that program with $500 for all low-income public-school students statewide, with an extra $500 for homeless and foster youth.

The temporary nature of relief funding makes it especially suitable for family payments. Districts need to move quickly to get students back on track. Meanwhile districts have this one-time money for just a few years. That creates a perfect window to try this with families, knowing that such programs can move money rapidly but then get switched off when the money runs out. When districts default to hiring staff with the temporary money, the only off-switch is to resort to disruptive layoffs—which often disproportionately impact high-poverty students.

With labor so tight and cash available to try new things, there's nothing stopping districts from looking to their students and families for help to get things done. Long Beach Unified is paying high schoolers to tutor younger students (with other districts considering the same move). Another district is using relief funds to pay parents stipends to train other parents to support students.

At a recent conference of the Association of School Budget Officials, the idea of giving money to families came up among leaders struggling to convert relief dollars into real value for students. Most district leaders had lots of questions:

- ***Is this allowed?*** Yes. Federal guidance offers examples of paying parents and students, provided payments are "reasonable in size and scope."
- ***Who issues the payments?*** Some use a vendor to handle the mechanics.
- ***Does the IRS need to be involved?*** Not if payments are under $600 per family per calendar year.
- ***Is this the same as vouchers?*** No. Vouchers allow funds to bypass a district to enable a student to enroll elsewhere. In contrast, with this idea, the district chooses to deploy some of its dollars to its families.
- ***What if it won't work for every family?*** Chances are it won't. But if it works for many, or most, districts can concentrate existing services (like in-school tutoring) for those where the new model isn't working.
- ***What does research say?*** The money should be a payment for tasks completed (not a reward for performance). Harvard research found that paying for attendance at parent-teacher conferences resulted in double the attendance. A UK study found that lower-performing students are more responsive, suggesting efforts should be targeted to schools with higher concentrations of high-needs students.

Sharing even a fraction of relief aid with families shows them where the money's going and that they're valued. It's politically savvy, especially amidst a flurry of headlines wondering what districts are doing with all those dollars. Programs in Idaho and North Carolina that sent funds to families for laptops and supports during virtual learning proved immensely popular with parents. Families take notice when they're involved and can see their federal dollars up close and in action.

And it sends parents a clear message that families are important partners in this recovery effort. That message alone is worth something.

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