

OPINION

Opinion: Why our schools need to reopen

By [David Hill](#), Guest Columnist

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Shelby County Schools is now the only district in Tennessee where no child can go to school in person. (Source: Getty Images)

GUEST COLUMNIST

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Consider this glaring systemic inequality: according to a nationwide survey by Chalkbeat and The Associated Press, white children are two times more likely than Black and Hispanic children to have the option of going to school in person. Shouldn't we be more troubled by this social injustice?

This separate and unequal access to school is perhaps most stark in Memphis. In our city, parents can take their children to restaurants, movie theaters, and basketball gyms. The one place families cannot take their children: school.

SCS gives parents more time to decide where their children will learn

Shelby County Schools is now the only district in Tennessee where no child can go to school in person. Of these students to whom school doors are closed, 92% are African American or Hispanic. School doors are open — mostly in private schools and suburban school districts — for the vast majority of white children.

One might assume that schools' reopening decisions have been influenced by the local prevalence of the coronavirus. However, a national study by the Brookings Institution found no relationship between school districts' reopening decisions and new per capita coronavirus cases.

After learning much about the coronavirus, health experts are increasingly agreeing that in-person school can be done safely for students and teachers. In September, Jon McCullers, the pediatrician-in-chief at Le Bonheur Children's Hospital, told The Commercial Appeal that he would "love to see SCS back in the classrooms" and that "we're not seeing transmission within the schools within the normal school setting."

Tennessee's new schools report card omits more than it includes

This terrific local finding mirrors national trends. Brooke Nichols, an infectious disease modeler at the Boston University School of Public Health, recently told The New York Times, "The more and more data that I see, the more comfortable I am that children are not, in fact, driving transmission, especially in school settings."

By keeping children — especially the youngest — out of in-person school, we are pursuing a strategy in which the costs outweigh the benefits. Young children are the least likely to be harmed by COVID-19, the least likely to transmit COVID-19, and the least likely to successfully navigate remote learning. Young children in Shelby County Schools should have the opportunity to learn how to read from an in-person teacher and to laugh with friends at recess — just as they could if they lived anywhere else in Tennessee.

Clearly, families should have the option to choose remote learning during this health emergency. Black and Hispanic families may more frequently choose this option because of social inequalities that lead to disparate health outcomes and greater risks for Covid-19 complications. However, we should be deeply concerned that so many families of color in Memphis are disproportionately forced into stay-at-home school.

[SCS looks at options to improve air quality in aging buildings](#)

Memphis children need access to in-person school for the same reasons as do children in New Canaan, Connecticut, where Superintendent Bryan Luizzi has reopened school buildings after losing his father to Covid-19 last spring. He explained to The Wall Street Journal: “The work we do in school really, really matters and it’s not the same when they’re not here. This is their life.”

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Letters & Commentary

GUEST COLUMN

School vouchers improve education outcomes

By David Hill

Special to Viewpoint

A few years ago, a colleague at the legacy Memphis City Schools was surprised to learn that I supported school vouchers.

To explain, let's begin with a single child. Which would be better for this child — his or her parents choosing a school from a broad menu of excellent choices or having fewer options due to family income?

School vouchers would benefit children and our entire community in important new ways, though the concept itself would not be entirely new. I will offer three points to support this claim:

The very best research indicates that school vouchers improve educational outcomes.

Only one voucher study has utilized the gold stan-

dard of research — the "luck of the draw" — while tracking the impact of vouchers from kindergarten to college matriculation. In 2012, Harvard University and the Brookings Institution researchers detailed the long-term impact of privately funded vouchers for low-income students in New York City.

Results showed that African-American students who used a voucher to attend a private school were 24 percent more likely to enroll in college than were African-American students who did not win the voucher lottery. They were also more than twice as likely to attend a selective college.

Because pure chance



David Hill

determined lottery winners, we know that the group of students with vouchers shared the same characteristics and circumstances as the group without vouchers. Therefore, we can be confident that the voucher itself — and not other unseen factors — made the difference in these children's lives.

We should have less confidence in voucher studies that lack the "luck of the draw" and, therefore, compare apples to oranges. After all, accurate data can be misleading. For example, did you know that eating ice cream appears to cause people to drown? There really are more drowning fatalities on days when more ice cream is eaten. Of course, though, it is swimming — not ice cream — that increases drowning rates. Ice cream is simply connected to swimming because people are more

likely to both eat ice cream and swim on hot days.

School vouchers have the potential to save money.

Opponents of vouchers often claim that school vouchers "drain" public funding, but the opposite is true. Vouchers save taxpayer money when the voucher amount is less than the total public funding it would otherwise take to educate a child. The Friedman Foundation recently studied 10 school vouchers programs and found that the vouchers have thus far saved taxpayers at least \$1.7 billion. Because of such savings, public school systems typically have higher per-pupil funding as a result of vouchers.

Tennesseans already use public funds to pay for private school tuition.

It is sometimes argued that public funding should not be used for private

education. This is an odd argument, given that the state of Tennessee offers tuition scholarships, including Tennessee Hope Scholarships, to students attending numerous private colleges and universities. Similarly, the Tennessee Child Care Certificate Program provides publicly funded subsidies for a variety of child care options, including private preschools.

With the Tennessee General Assembly considering voucher legislation, the Jubilee Catholic Schools Network welcomes the prospect of more children benefiting from the hard work of our talented and committed teachers.

Over the past two years, more than three-fourths of our elementary students (of whom 87 percent are economically disadvantaged) met or exceeded their expected achieve-

ment growth on the Iowa Assessment Core Composite, and our kindergarten students averaged above the 80th national percentile in reading. Encouraged but not satisfied, we will continually look for even better ways to provide an academically rigorous and vibrantly Catholic education that prepares children to become all that God created them to be.

School vouchers have the potential to improve educational outcomes, save taxpayer dollars, and increase per-pupil funding for public schools. With public funding already supporting the private educations of many pre-K and college students, it is now time to provide the same publicly funded educational opportunities to children in grades K-12.

David Hill is president of the Jubilee Catholic Schools Network in the Diocese of Memphis.

Guest column: Teacher Effectiveness Initiative is right path

When carefully implemented, the TEI will help ensure that all of our students are blessed with teachers who are as effective as today's best ones.

By David Hill, Special to The Commercial Appeal

Friday, November 11, 2011

At the recent launch of his "Education Champions" campaign that spotlights educational organizations making a difference in Memphis, Elliot Perry reminded us:

"It's not about one system or one solution. There are many chapters in the story of the work taking place day in and day out in our city and in our neighborhoods to transform our schools."

In our Jubilee Catholic Schools, we feel humbled to be called one of Elliot Perry's "Education Champions" and continue striving to make our chapter the best it can be for our students. At the same time, we are grateful for the other exciting chapters being written in our community -- including, in particular, the Teacher Effectiveness Initiative (TEI).

As lead writer and developer of the TEI proposal that Memphis City Schools submitted to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, I join many in our community in eager anticipation of meaningful and far-reaching educational improvements. My eagerness to see the TEI succeed is admittedly due, in part, to the time and effort invested during its development and early implementation phases.

However, of much greater importance is the TEI's very real potential to transform the way we conduct public education in Shelby County. Such a transformation can absolutely change the learning and life trajectories of our youth -- and improve the larger community for all of us. We must not let this opportunity slip through our hands.

The significant financial investments of the Gates Foundation and local philanthropic community are unprecedented, and the power of the TEI is seen in what these resources make possible: an entirely new, action-oriented focus on our children's teachers.

The TEI is based on the following fundamental strategies:

Creating a common, agreed-upon process to define and measure effective teaching.

Making smarter decisions about who teaches.

Better supporting, utilizing and compensating teachers.

Improving the surrounding contexts for teachers and students.

Of course, the details beneath these high-level strategies are not etched in stone, but the plan is solid at all levels. In fact, a senior representative of the Gates Foundation called the TEI "one of the greatest, boldest and most thoughtful plans" the foundation had ever seen. The TEI even served as a cornerstone in Tennessee's successful \$500 million "Race to the Top" application.

Our community has engaged in much healthy discussion about the nuts and bolts of the TEI. At times, however, we seem to lose sight of the heart of the TEI. At its core, the Teacher Effectiveness Initiative is a much-deserved, though belated, compliment to the teaching profession.

The TEI acts upon strong research showing that the teacher impacts student learning more than anything else inside a school. If this research had been introduced while I was teaching at South Side High School, my colleagues and I would surely have said, "Agreed! And thank you for finally noticing!"

Years ago, there must have been similar responses on baseball fields when people began noticing that the pitcher was the most important position. I have to imagine pitchers appreciating the "compliment" and subsequently raising their performance levels in turn. I believe that our teachers -- especially the best ones and those who want to be great -- will do the same.

Our community has before it a truly once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. When carefully implemented, the TEI will help ensure that all students in our community are blessed with teachers who are as effective as today's best ones. By raising student achievement, these excellent teachers will open doors of opportunity for thousands and thousands of young people. In doing so, these effective teachers will help bring about the broad-based educational advancements that will directly improve our community's entire economic and social health.

We have known all along that the TEI was going to be challenging to implement and sustain, as it calls for difficult decisions. After all, there is no easy way to achieve the gigantic educational improvements needed when approximately 4 percent of our city's public school students become "college-ready" according to the ACT. That is why the TEI needs the strong and urgent support of everybody in this community.

A challenging path is more likely to be continued when accompanied by determined reminders that the path is the right one. The TEI is our right path.

It is up to each of us -- from our different corners and perspectives -- to help ensure this promising path is followed.

David Hill is director of academic operations for the Diocese of Memphis Catholic Schools. He formerly served as executive director of teacher effectiveness for Memphis City Schools.



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