

THE STATE OF THE AMERICAN STUDENT 2026

What Are States Doing to Help Students
Recover and Prepare for the Future?





Acknowledgments

A team of researchers, writers, editors, project managers, and designers contributed to this report. Chelsea Waite and Robin Lake led the writing process. Dan Silver at the University of Southern California contributed to analysis. Shauna Campbell contributed to literature review and fact checking. Nadja Michel-Herf served as project manager and contributed to data visualization and analysis. Colleagues Ashley Jochim, Morgan Polikoff, and Rebecca Wolfe provided valuable feedback on early drafts. Melissa Fall, Alan Bradshaw, and Emily Prymula provided editing support. Emily Prymula led publication planning and coordinated art direction with Six Half Dozen, who designed the report, webpage, and related graphics. Abby Jacobs steered impact planning and media outreach in partnership with Lisa Cohen. We are grateful to our philanthropic partners for supporting the research that informed this report: the Gates Foundation, the Andrew Carnegie Foundation, Oak Foundation, and the Walton Family Foundation. Any omissions or errors are the authors' own. More information about CRPE's work, including other extensive research reports, data, and resources on K-12 public education, is available at crpe.org.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	4
Fast Facts	8
Situation Report 2026: Recovery is unlikely, and AI is here before schools are ready.	11
Part 1: Most states haven't clearly said what they're trying to achieve, and the ones that have are focused on core academics.	17
Part 2: Every state's policy infrastructure has gaps, and math is the weak spot everywhere.	20
Part 3: Where strategies diverge, they tend to split along partisan lines.	31
Part 4: Variation between higher- and lower-performing states is growing.	37
What Needs to Happen Next	43
Conclusion	47



Executive Summary

SIX YEARS AFTER THE PANDEMIC, RECOVERY HAS FAILED.

Only 10.5% of students are in districts that have fully recovered to 2019 math and reading performance. Achievement gaps are still growing: since 2022, the nation's top 10% of eighth graders gained three points in math while the bottom 10% lost five. But the roots of these problems predate the pandemic: academic achievement began declining nationally in 2013, and 47% of the post-pandemic declines in eighth-grade math on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) would have been predicted by pre-pandemic trends. Longstanding racial and disability gaps have also continued to widen. Public satisfaction with the quality of American education fell from 51% in 2019 to 32% in 2026, a 27-year low. Districts now face intensifying pressures from falling enrollment, unstable budgets, and the rapid, largely ungoverned rollout of AI in classrooms.

Student outcomes vary widely across states—but every state, not just the lower performers, has reason to act with urgency. An average **Mississippi** eighth grader is nearly two and a half years ahead of an average **West Virginia** eighth grader on demographically adjusted NAEP scores. Students' predicted lifetime earnings losses from the pandemic range from 2% in the least-affected states to 9% in the hardest-hit. Only one state, **Louisiana**, can boast pandemic recovery in both math and reading. In every state, achievement gaps have widened.

At the same time, the federal government continues to step back, a trend that predated but also sharply accelerated under the Trump administration. With all eyes on states to lead, this year we asked a very basic question: **What are states doing to meet the moment, and are their efforts likely to work?**

What We Found

Most states haven't said what they're trying to achieve.

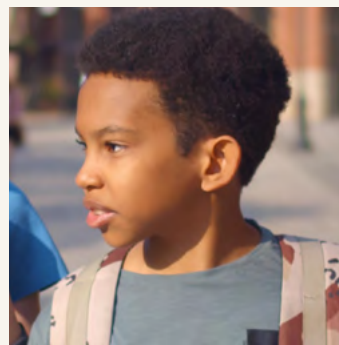
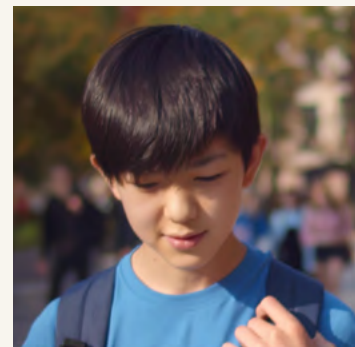
Only 13 states have a clear, specific, statewide goal for student learning that is strongly signaled in multiple sources. Among them is **South Carolina**, which aims for 75% of its students to be performing at grade level by 2030. But goals like this are the exception. Eleven states have published no statewide goal for student learning at all. If state officials cannot say what they are trying to achieve, they cannot be held to it, nor can schools.

Every state's policy infrastructure to improve student outcomes has gaps, especially in math.

We found a weak link between the kinds of goals states are setting—to improve core academic outcomes and postsecondary success—and their policy adoption in four key areas that matter for those goals.

- In **literacy**, 43 states have passed Science of Reading laws, and 49 have passed at least one reading-related bill since 2019. But fewer have established the comprehensive implementation infrastructure or accountability muscle that can turn a law into classroom practice.
- In **math**, 18 states have passed a math law, and implementation infrastructure is far weaker than in literacy: according to a scan from nonprofit ExcelinEd, 37 states aren't fully implementing a single one of ExcelinEd's 11 recommended math policies.
- **Career pathways** policies are a patchwork: according to an analysis by the nonprofit Jobs for the Future (JFF), only six states have adopted a majority of JFF's 19 recommended career navigation policies. Thirty-one states have adopted a third of the policies or fewer, with little attention to infrastructure and quality assurance.
- On **AI guidance**, states are moving fast: 36 states have issued or endorsed guidance. But much of this guidance treats AI as something to layer onto a flawed system, not a reason to rethink it. Only one state, **Maryland**, requires that AI tools be vetted for academic outcomes before reaching classrooms.

Strong performance in one domain does not predict strong performance in another. **Utah** has some of the most thoughtful state guidance on AI in the country, but no math law. **Washington** is a recognized leader on career navigation policy, but its reading and math reforms are thin. States like **Tennessee** and **Maryland** are leading across multiple areas, but still have work to do in math, especially. Meanwhile, states like **New York** and **South Dakota** are taking little visible policy action to improve student outcomes.



Red and blue states are making very different bets about what will help students succeed.

State-led instructional reform patterns in math and literacy are not only uneven but also partisan. While literacy reform overall displays bipartisan common ground, red states are adopting a more comprehensive set of policies and enforcing them more aggressively. The National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) found that only 12 states have “strong” policies ensuring teacher preparation programs teach the Science of Reading, and eight of them are red. Red states are also moving faster in math: 13 of the 18 states with math laws are red, and two red states—**Alabama** and **Arkansas**—are the only two in the country that NCTQ rated as “strong” on math teacher preparation.

The partisan divides go beyond instruction. Twenty red or purple states have enacted education savings accounts or tax credits since 2019, even as evidence that choice improves outcomes remains [thin](#). In blue states, student well-being appears to be a signature issue in progressive policymaking: nearly three-quarters of well-being-related bills introduced since 2022 were sponsored by Democrats.

Both sides have inconsistencies to answer for: How do red states reconcile aggressive instructional reform with support for private school choice markets that face almost no public accountability? Can lower-performing red states reach top-tier outcomes without investing in the economic and health conditions that [support](#) children? How do blue states square ambitious rhetoric about academic improvement with a persistent unwillingness to require evidence-based instruction?

Outcomes also vary even when policies are similar: **Mississippi** and **Florida** are both implementing comprehensive literacy reform, but Mississippi has seen sustained improvements with a comprehensive literacy reform package, while Florida, which implements similar policies alongside a larger and fast-growing private school choice market, ranks [last](#) among states in reading recovery.

After narrowing for two decades, variation in state performance is now growing.

It’s now well-established that academic outcomes began declining in 2013, but our analysis revealed a second concerning trend. Since 2019, the variation between states’ average scores on NAEP’s eighth-grade tests (both math and reading) has widened after two decades of narrowing.

We don’t know why this is happening. But we worry that diverging state strategies, driven more by partisanship than by sound strategy and evidence, will make the inequality between states worse. States are taking sharply different approaches to recovery and improvement, with almost no shared evidence base, few guardrails, and no real structure for figuring out which approaches are working.



What Must Happen Next

We are a nation becoming both less educated and more unequal by geography. A bygone era of education reform sought to reduce inequality with more federal control and accountability. Today, especially under this administration, we must demand stronger and more evidence-driven leadership from each state across the nation.

Every state needs a strong, coherent, evidence-driven strategy. A literacy law is not a strategy. A funding increase is not a strategy. With a strategy, a state's goals, infrastructure, and accountability fit together into something coherent enough to move outcomes, not just on average but for students with the most ground to make up. By this standard, most states come up short.

Researchers must quickly build actionable evidence for what makes state strategies effective. We know a great deal about what works in a classroom, a school, a district. We know far less about what makes a state-led reform effort take hold and improve learning across hundreds of districts and thousands of schools. To begin establishing transparency and to support knowledge diffusion across states, CRPE will launch a new report in Spring 2027 to assess specific state policies and actions against what the research says about effective state improvement strategies.

Funders and advocates should hold states accountable for creating an improvement strategy and following through on it. The country needs nationwide infrastructure that can help states learn, honestly and quickly, which of their diverging strategies are working, before the wrong answers get locked in for a generation. Over time, policymakers at the national level should reimagine and reestablish a role for the federal government that focuses on R&D, civil rights protection, and incentives to reward improvement.

Inside states and across the nation, political leaders must prioritize bipartisan coalition-building focused on what matters for families and what works for students. The students who need states to get this right the most have the least power to demand it. We call on state policymakers, advocates, and the federal government to be far more assertive about putting what we already know into practice—and to do so fast enough that students learning in American schools today do not age out of the system before it's capable of preparing them for the future.





Fast Facts

Pandemic recovery has failed for the vast majority of students, especially the most vulnerable.



Share of US students in districts that have recovered to pre-pandemic achievement in both math and reading

(Education Scorecard, 2025)



States that have returned to pre-pandemic attendance levels

(FutureEd)

Change in US eighth-grade math scores since 2022:

TOP 10% OF STUDENTS:



BOTTOM 10% OF STUDENTS:



(NAEP via *The 74*)

Students chronically absent:

BEFORE THE PANDEMIC:



IN 2024-25:



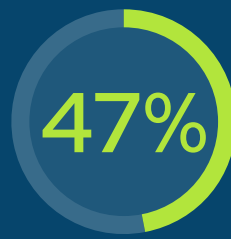
(AEI)

The problem is even bigger than pandemic recovery.



The year nationwide academic achievement began to decline

(Wyckoff, 2025)



Share of the post-pandemic decline on NAEP eighth-grade math that pre-pandemic trends alone would have predicted

(Wyckoff, 2025)



Teachers who reported experiencing burnout in 2026

(RAND)

Change in the share of fourth graders with disabilities scoring at least "Basic" in NAEP math:

Adults satisfied with American public education:

FROM 2009-2019: **-13.1 % pts**

FROM 2019-2022: **-3.4 % pts**

IN 2019: **51%**

IN 2026: **32%**

(CRPE analysis of NAEP data, forthcoming)

(Gallup)

AI is already in classrooms, and state guidance is a patchwork.

Teachers and students who used AI for school purposes:

TEACHERS: **85%**

STUDENTS: **50%**

(Center for Democracy and Technology)



States without K-12 AI guidance



States that have published or endorsed K-12 AI guidance since 2023



States with guidance that requires AI tools to be vetted for academic outcomes (Maryland)

(CRPE analysis, 2026)

Student outcomes vary dramatically across states.

Estimated lifetime earnings loss due to pandemic learning loss for students:

IN THE LEAST-AFFECTED STATES:

2%

IN THE HARDEST-HIT STATES:

up to 9%



State scoring above 2019 levels in both math and reading (Louisiana)

(Education Scorecard)

(Hanushek et al., 2024)

Growth in the gap between highest and lowest performers, 2013–24:

25.5



25.5 NAEP POINTS IN PENNSYLVANIA, WHERE THE GAP HAS GROWN FASTEST

(NAEP via *The 74*)

6.6



6.6 NAEP POINTS IN NORTH DAKOTA, WHERE THE GAP HAS GROWN SLOWEST

But every state has work to do.

50/50 (+DC)

States where the gap between the highest- and lowest-performing eighth graders in math grew from 2013 to 2024

(*The 74*)

States with “strong” policies for effectively preparing teachers:

12/50

(NCTQ)

IN LITERACY

2/50

(NCTQ)

IN MATH



Situation Report 2026

Recovery is unlikely, and AI is here before schools are ready.

CRPE's annual reports on the state of student outcomes in America have a clear, consistent message: pandemic losses are deep and persistent, and they worsen preexisting, hard-wired inequities in the American education system.

American students are not okay. This is not a pandemic story, though the pandemic made everything worse. It is not a funding story, though money matters. And it is not a political story, though the politics of this moment are impossible to ignore.

It is a human story about a generation of young people who have been let down by a system that keeps returning to normal when normal was never good enough. The future that students now face is more complicated than anything schools have been asked to prepare for in decades.

Recovery remains rare, six years later.

“We’ve got to go far beyond normal to help students catch up.”

Thomas Kane, Professor of Education and Economics, Founder and Director of the Center for Education Policy Research, Harvard University ([Harvard Magazine](#))

Six years after the pandemic shuttered schools and upended learning, a clear-eyed accounting of the consequences is sobering. On the international PISA exam, the United States [scored](#) lower in math and reading than ever before, and posted the largest gap between the highest and lowest performing students in reading. On NAEP, [30%](#) of fourth graders scored Proficient or Advanced in reading in 2024, down from 32% in 2022. At the bottom of the achievement distribution, the situation is worse: [34%](#) of eighth graders scored below Basic in reading, the [largest percentage](#) in that category since NAEP began testing it 32 years ago. Achievement gaps have [always played out](#) along lines of race, income, home language, and disability status, and the pandemic widened every one of those gaps. For example, the share of eighth graders in special education scoring at least Basic in math fell by a third between 2009 and 2024, most of it before the pandemic. Studies that follow these students over time find that the gaps between them and their peers.¹

[Fourth-grade math results](#) have improved slightly on average, but the nation’s highest performers drove those improvements. On NWEA MAP tests, students in kindergarten through eighth grade [improved significantly](#) in reading, leading the NWEA report authors to conclude that “reading recovery has finally begun.” But for most students who were in those grades when schools closed, recovery only began after they had moved on.

The harder truth is that the pandemic shook a system that, at its baseline, was already failing millions of students. Nearly half of the students whose education was disrupted by school closures have since moved on to college or the workforce, often [without](#) the opportunity to make up for lost learning time. The students who remain in K–12 schools deserve better than a return to an inadequate system. Recovery is a starting point, not the finish line.

AI has arrived, whether or not schools are ready.

Eighty-five percent of teachers and 50% of students [used AI](#) for school purposes in the 2024–25 school year, but most schools and districts are navigating this [without a clear map](#). Parents and communities are raising the alarm about what technology is doing to adolescent development. States are increasingly putting limits on screen time in classrooms. At the same time, the World Economic Forum [projects](#) AI will displace 92 million jobs while creating 170 million new ones, meaning the students in classrooms today will enter a labor market being remade in real time. How the American education system responds to AI will be one of the defining questions of this decade.

¹ A CRPE report on special education, forthcoming, will present these findings in detail.

Pressures on schools and districts are mounting.

Public school enrollment has [shifted](#) substantially, declining in 30 states since the mid-2010s due to multiple causes: the falling birth rate, migration, the expansion of private school choice policies in more than a dozen states, and a pandemic-era loss of confidence in public schools. The consequences are landing hard on district budgets. More districts are [grappling](#) with [insolvency](#), particularly those that spent pandemic relief funds on recurring expenses without planning for what would happen when the funding came to an end. School board meetings have become battlegrounds over curriculum and which topics can be addressed in classrooms, leaving board members with less capacity for the substantive work of improving instruction and outcomes.



Federal leadership is weakening, and all eyes are on states.

“Our national [PISA] results mask significant state-by-state variation. Mississippi, Louisiana, Tennessee, and D.C. all saw steady gains... Other states took their foot off the gas with predictable results. Given that the federal government has neither the inclination nor the capacity to build out a strategy, we have to embrace the state-by-state nature of the work.”

Kevin Huffman, CEO of Accelerate

Signals from the Trump administration are mixed. On the one hand, the administration has stated an [intention](#) to return authority over public education to states and localities. While the bipartisan Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 had already [shifted](#) significant responsibility to states, the current administration is pushing that logic further by inviting states to seek waivers for “[creative and effective](#)” uses of federal funds. The 18 states that have [received](#) waivers so far have a real opportunity to use federal funds in new ways, provided they harness that flexibility to drive stronger student outcomes. At the same time, the administration is still [intervening](#) forcefully and erratically in education policy, and states are dealing with grant cancellations and funding freezes. [Immigration enforcement](#) is impacting student engagement and attendance, and significant staff reductions at the Department of Education have raised concerns about federal capacity to enforce special education and civil rights laws and to collect and report the data that states and researchers depend on.

Student outcomes vary across states, but every state needs to improve.

“We have made progress by putting kids before politics with results for students: increased achievement and smaller gaps. It’s time to do that again.”

Margaret Spellings, President and CEO, Bipartisan Policy Center, former Secretary of Education ([Bipartisan Policy Center](#))

States’ academic performance varies widely, and the difference between the highest- and lowest-performing states has direct implications for students. An average eighth-grade math student in Mississippi, which ranks highest on demographically adjusted NAEP scores (see Table 1 on next page), is nearly two and a half years ahead of an average eighth-grade math student in West Virginia, which ranks lowest.²

An enduring popular narrative holds that blue states outperform most peers, but the reality is far more mixed. When using demographically adjusted NAEP scores, the highest-ranked and lowest-ranked states span the political spectrum (see Table 1 on next page).

CRPE’S PARTISAN CATEGORIZATION FOR STATES

To classify states, we use Cook’s Partisan Voting Index (PVI), a widely used political benchmarking measure.

	Number of states	Cook’s PVI Threshold
Red	24	At least +5* Republican
Purple	13	Between +5 Republican and +5 Democratic
Blue	13**	At least +5 Democratic

* In Cook’s PVI, this number indicates how many more percentage points a state voted in a partisan direction versus the national average across the last two presidential elections.

** This number usually includes the District of Columbia for a total of 14; however, CRPE excluded DC from most of this report’s analysis because its unique governance, historical performance, and policymaking all make it incomparable with other US states.

Learn more about how we conducted this analysis in the [Technical Appendix](#).

2 On demographically adjusted NAEP rankings, Mississippi achieved 281.3 (out of 500) on NAEP 8th Grade Math in 2024; West Virginia scored 257.3. Since 10 NAEP points [approximates](#) one year of learning, a gap of 24 points represents nearly 2.5 years of learning.

TABLE 1. BOTH THE HIGHEST-RANKED AND LOWEST-RANKED STATES SPAN THE POLITICAL SPECTRUM

Top 10 and Bottom 10 states on NAEP 8th-Grade Math in 2024, ranked by demographically adjusted scores that compare students in one state against demographically similar peers in other states

TOP 10		
1	Mississippi	Red
2	Massachusetts	Blue
3	Louisiana	Red
4	Illinois	Blue
5	Indiana	Red
6	Texas	Red
7	Ohio	Red
8	Wisconsin	Purple
9	Georgia	Purple
10	New Jersey	Purple

BOTTOM 10		
41	Maine	Purple
42	Wyoming	Red
43	Missouri	Red
44	Michigan	Purple
45	Alabama	Red
46	Alaska	Red
47	Hawaii	Blue
48	Delaware	Blue
49	Oregon	Blue
50	West Virginia	Red

Urban Institute and CRPE partisan categories (see box on p. 14)

Every state, regardless of performance, is seeing achievement gaps grow. Only one state—**Louisiana**—has recovered to pre-pandemic average scores in both math and reading. Most states had already lost ground before the pandemic struck, meaning that pandemic recovery alone will not be enough to turn around a deep learning recession. Even historically low-ranking states making impressive gains, like **Mississippi**, **Alabama**, and **Louisiana**, have stubborn achievement gaps and more progress to make. And improving from the middle or the top of the rankings, as Mississippi must now do, is often harder than improving from the bottom.

State policy levers matter for improvement.

With federal leadership atrophied, states now hold enormous responsibility for driving improvements in American education. State leadership can feel far removed from a child's desk, especially when local control and a long history of racial and wealth segregation mean that two children in the same state can receive entirely different educations. But there is a logical chain that connects state policy to what students experience. States set standards, graduation requirements, and policies on learning materials. They can regulate educator licensure and preparation, communicate school quality to families, and influence what schooling options families have. States can determine improvement targets, how quality is measured, and how resources are allocated. All these decisions can meaningfully affect student learning opportunities and school improvement. The historical record shows that [states across the political spectrum](#) have implemented education reforms that led to improvements for students and families.

This report asks four questions.

1. **What do states themselves say they are trying to achieve?**
2. **What policies are states putting in place to reach those goals?**
3. **Does policy adoption break along partisan lines?**
4. **How are states currently performing relative to each other?**

The answers, in order, make up the rest of this report.



Part 1



Most states haven't clearly said what they're trying to achieve, and the ones that have are focused on core academics.

“We choose to go to the moon in this decade ... not because [it is] easy, but because [it is] hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills.”

President John F. Kennedy

What goals are states setting for improving student outcomes?

From March through May 2026, CRPE scanned all 50 states for publicly available evidence of statewide goals for student learning. We looked for goals prominent enough that a parent or teacher could actually find them: on a state education agency’s website, in a strategic plan, or in a governor’s State of the State address, not buried in a technical document or an Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) plan (which all states are required to have).

States receiving one point, the lowest score, had no statewide goals for student learning that we could find. States with a statewide learning goal received two points, and states whose statewide learning goal is specific—both time-bound and numeric, which enables a goal to be benchmarked and measured—earned three points. States earning the highest score, four points, are those where we found a specific statewide learning goal that is repeated in multiple sources that were easy to find (in other words, goals that are strongly signaled).

Washington, DC, and the US territories face the same urgency as states to help students recover and prepare for the future. However, their governance arrangements are different enough to deserve their own analysis, and we have focused this report on the 50 US states. See the [Technical Appendix](#) for additional details.



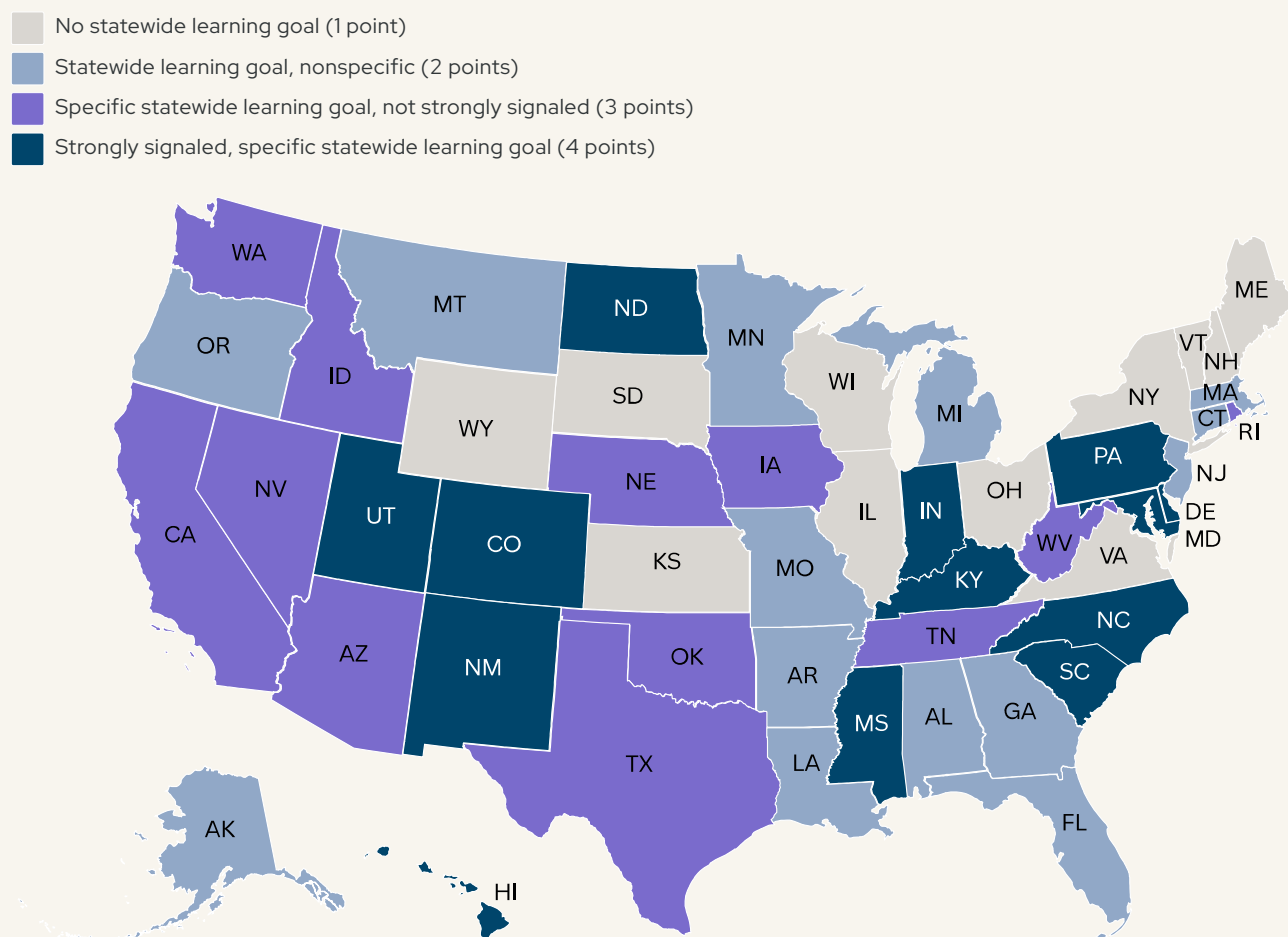
How did CRPE evaluate state goals for student learning? [Read more about our methodology.](#)

Only 13 states have set time-bound, strongly signaled goals tied to specific numeric outcomes for student learning

South Carolina aims for at least 75% of students to be at or above grade level by 2030. This goal is published [front and center](#) on the state department of education’s website, repeated in the state’s report card, and further reinforced by the state’s Read to Succeed Act, first passed in 2014. **Maryland** aims for every student to graduate from high school college- and career-ready, and tracks numeric and time-bound targets on a public strategic plan dashboard (see Figure 1 on next page).

FIGURE 1: ONLY 13 STATES ARE STRONGLY SIGNALING CLEAR GOALS FOR STUDENT LEARNING

CRPE's ranking of state goal-setting on a 1-4 point scale



CRPE analysis, 2026

These are exceptions. Eleven states have set no statewide learning goals at all. Fourteen have set vague goals, like Florida’s statewide goal of “highest student achievement.”³ Twelve states have set specific goals for student learning, but in only one source, and often buried so deeply in a strategic plan or technical document that a parent or teacher would struggle to find them.

We found no partisan pattern in goal-setting. Red, blue, and purple states have comparable average scores in our scan,⁴ and recent NAEP performance doesn't predict which states have set clear goals, either.

Most existing statewide goals focus on reading, math, and postsecondary outcomes.

Among the 39 states that set any goals (whether or not they were specific and strongly signaled), 30 set goals focused on core academics, namely literacy and math outcomes. About half of the 39 states have set goals related to postsecondary success.

3 Florida's accountability system holds schools accountable for individually calculated performance targets, but this is not translated into a statewide target that state leaders can work toward.

4 Red states averaged 2.6 points out of four; purple states 2.3; and blue states 2.7.

Part 2

Every state's policy infrastructure has gaps, and math is a weak spot everywhere.



If most states are setting goals to improve reading, math, and postsecondary outcomes, then we should expect to see states taking at least four steps to achieve these goals:

1. Improving literacy instruction.
2. Improving math instruction.
3. Linking K–12 education to career pathways.
4. Sharing guidance and creating policy on AI.

These are worthy aims, especially as pandemic recovery stagnates, achievement gaps grow, and young people worry about their college and career prospects. CRPE drew on over a dozen state scans from reputable research, advocacy, and journalism organizations to investigate what all 50 states are doing in each of these four areas (more information on our methodology can be found in the [Technical Appendix](#)).

We found that progress in each area looks different, and every state’s policy infrastructure across these four areas has gaps.

Literacy reform shows nationwide momentum, but uneven follow-through.

“Every child in America deserves the right to read proficiently by third grade.”

Keri Rodrigues, President, National Parents Union ([ABC News](#))

Literacy is the most active reform area, with genuine bipartisan momentum behind the Science of Reading. Since 2013, [43 states and DC](#) have passed a Science of Reading law, and lawmakers from both parties have introduced and passed these bills at comparable rates. The vast majority of states—80% or more across three separate trackers—now have policy in place on reading curriculum, teacher training, and assessment (see [Technical Appendix](#)). Around three-quarters of states’ reading laws discuss support for students with dyslexia and multilingual learners, as well as family engagement.

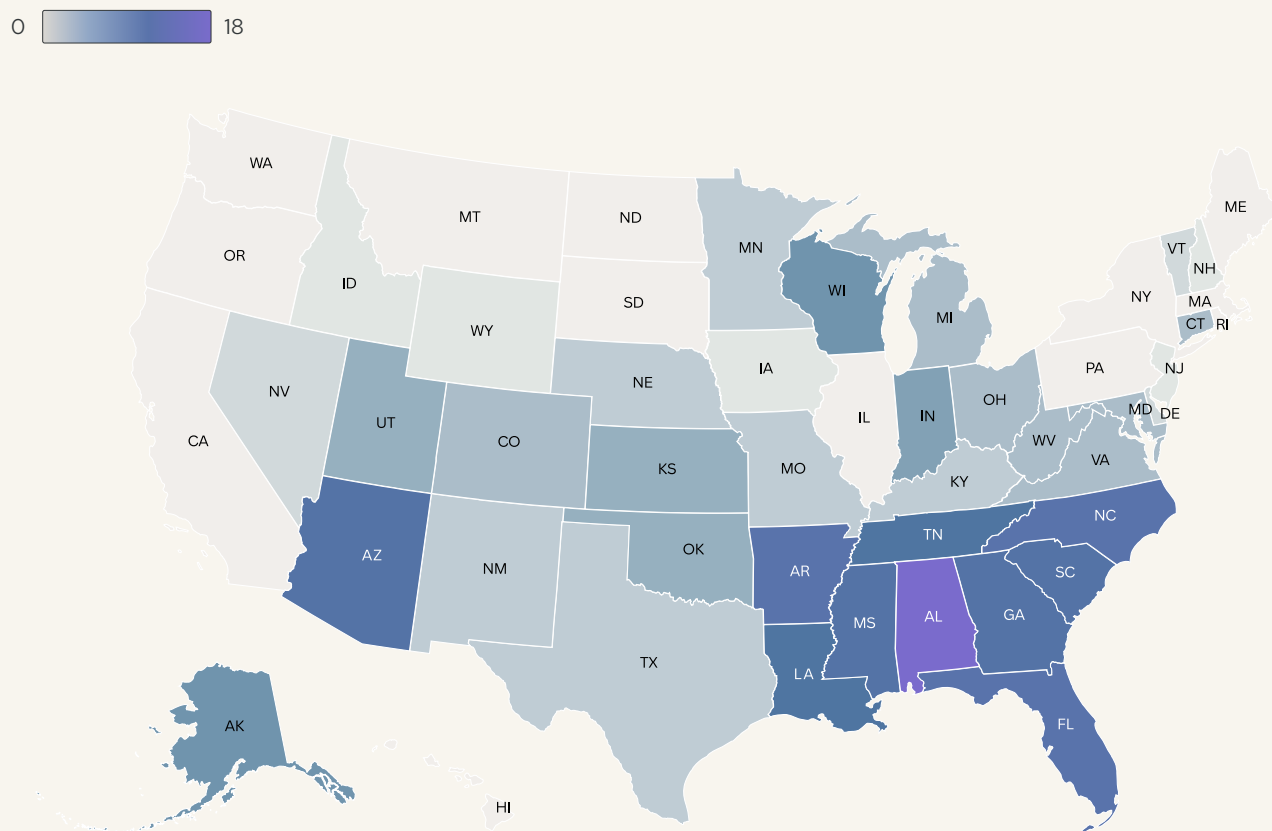
But some states are ahead of others in implementing these common policies. ExcelinEd’s [Early Literacy Matters](#) tracker, which evaluates actual implementation, shows 43 states are training educators in the Science of Reading. However, most are “[partial](#)” implementations, meaning that states may offer but not mandate the training, or that the training is limited only to some teachers. ExcelinEd also tracks some less commonly adopted policy measures, such as summer reading camps to accelerate learning for struggling students, which 20 states offer.



While most states have achieved at least “partial” implementation of a majority of ExcelinEd’s 18 Early Literacy Fundamental Principles, only eight states (**Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina**) are at “full” implementation of a majority of the principles (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2. ONLY EIGHT STATES ARE FULLY IMPLEMENTING MORE THAN HALF OF EXCELINED’S EARLY LITERACY PRINCIPLES

Number of ExcelinEd’s 18 Early Literacy Fundamental Principles implemented in “full,” by state



Source: CRPE calculations using state map data from Early Literacy Matters (ExcelinEd)

There isn’t yet strong evidence tying these early literacy principles directly to reading gains, and it’s not clear whether “full” adoption is more effective than “partial” adoption. But according to the Education Scorecard, every state that has made reading gains since 2022 was either partially or fully implementing at least seven of ExcelinEd’s 18 early literacy principles, and every state that implemented fewer than seven principles saw scores decline. Doing several interrelated things at once, rather than executing any single reform, appears to matter for improving outcomes.

Math is a weak spot for nearly every state.

“As artificial intelligence becomes increasingly important across the economy and public services, the need for strong mathematical capability will only grow.”

Nigel Campbell, Vice President, Academy for the Mathematical Sciences (UK)

Between 2022 and 2025, [18 states and DC](#) passed math reform laws, which have advanced faster than literacy laws did in their early years. CRPE found that most [converge](#) around a cluster of seven priorities that are associated with the nascent “Science of Math” movement.⁵ As more students struggle in math, high-evidence approaches have become even more important for schools to put in place systematically. Similar to the Science of Reading, the Science of Math attempts to resolve an ideological fight about good math instruction by prioritizing the policies and instructional levers with the strongest evidence behind them.

ExcelinEd’s “[Math Matters](#)” tracker goes beyond formal legislation. Similar to the Early Literacy Matters tracker, Math Matters examines if and to what degree states are implementing ExcelinEd’s [11 recommended math principles](#). For example, 41 of 50 states (82%) ensure that teachers receive professional development on evidence-based pedagogy, 39 (78%) stipulate that districts should adopt high-quality curricular materials, and 35 (70%) expect teacher preparation programs to teach effective math instruction.⁶ The tracker also reports that 39 states (78%) require that students take and pass Algebra I, ideally by the end of ninth grade, which matters because access to Algebra I [predicts](#) postsecondary success.

But implementation is shallow. Thirty-seven states are not at “full” implementation of any of ExcelinEd’s 11 recommended math principles. “Partial” adoption means that the policies are not yet in force, are not yet spanning across grade levels, or are suggestions instead of requirements. For instance, **Kentucky** partially implements 10 of ExcelinEd’s recommended 11 math policies, which is more than most states do. But the state’s requirements for teacher prep programs aren’t fully aligned with rigorous evidence on math instruction. The state requires districts to offer professional development, but doesn’t require teachers to participate. Districts must create individual math plans for students who need support, but the policy doesn’t specify details on timelines or progress monitoring. Students must take and pass Algebra I, but on no specified timeline. Meanwhile, **New Jersey** and **Wisconsin** are partially implementing only one principle.

⁵ The seven Science of Math priorities are: foundational numeracy, universal screening, data-based decision-making, systematic and explicit instruction, high-quality instructional materials, targeted intervention, and professional learning aligned to math education research.

⁶ Counts and percentages in this section are based on Math Matters data that ExcelinEd shared with CRPE in August 2026. ExcelinEd makes periodic public updates to these data, so available data on the web may not match exactly.

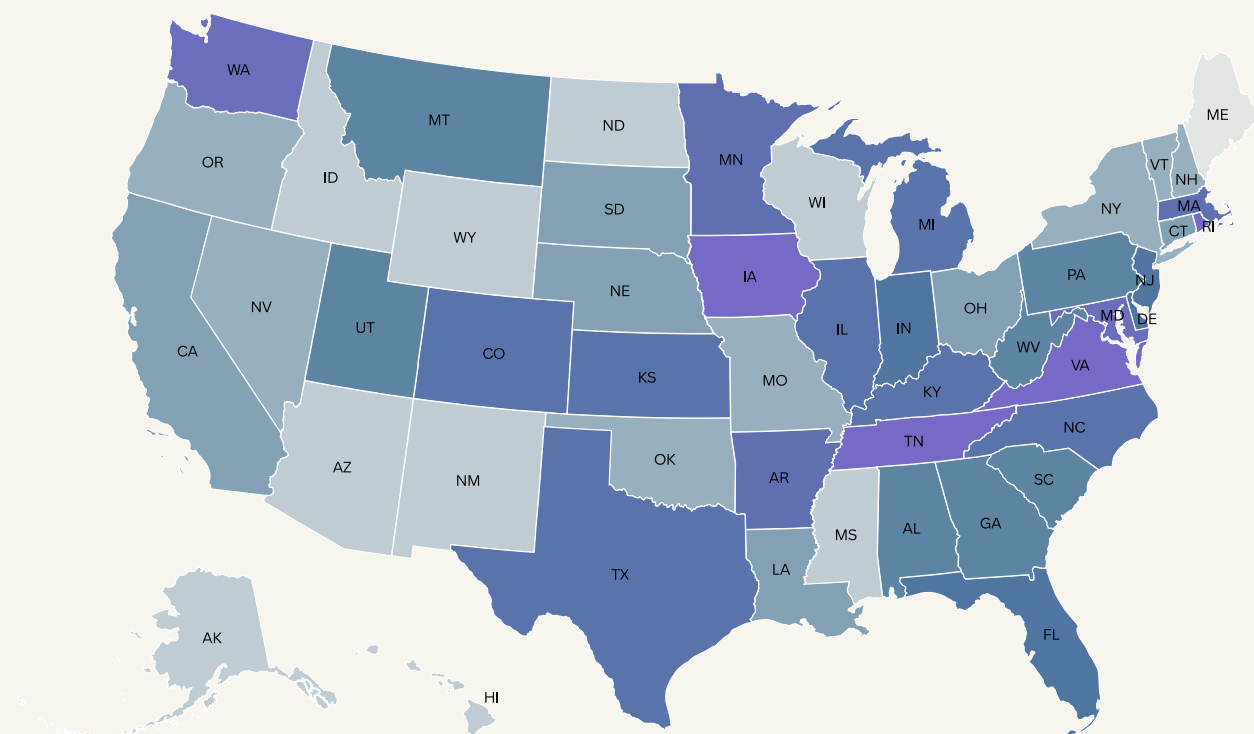
Career pathway policies are getting traction, but they are still underdeveloped.

Across the country, career-connected learning is gaining traction. Congress [created](#) the first-ever federal Pell Grant eligibility for short-term workforce credentials this year, and higher education access, workforce development, and career and technical education were common themes in governors' State of the State addresses in [2025](#) and [2026](#). But policy infrastructure to support career-connected learning and pathways is still patchy. A [report](#) from Jobs for the Future (JFF) on states' career navigation systems found that only six states—**Iowa, Maryland, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Virginia, and Washington**—have adopted a majority of the 19 policies that JFF considers necessary to ensure students can make informed decisions about their education and career options (See Figure 3). None of these states has put all of the policies in place, and 31 states have implemented a third or fewer. JFF concludes: "States have a long way to go to put in place key policies that will support robust career navigation systems."

FIGURE 3: ONLY SIX STATES HAVE ADOPTED A MAJORITY OF JFF'S RECOMMENDED CAREER NAVIGATION POLICIES

Number of JFF's 19 recommended career navigation policies adopted, by state

0  19



Jobs for the Future (JFF)

States are making the [most progress](#) around funding and financial incentives for work-based learning, but few states are undertaking the harder task of defining what quality programs look like. Only seven states have built statewide governance and data infrastructure to support cross-sector work-based learning partnerships, and just eight publish disaggregated data on earnings and employment outcomes for high school graduates.

AI guidance defers to districts, ignores quality, and lacks urgency to drive change.

“AI is entering classrooms faster than many education systems can decide whether they are ready for it, or how it should be used. The question is no longer whether the technology exists. It is whether schools and institutions can use it in ways that widen opportunity rather than deepen inequality.”

Qiqing He, founder of Global AI Governance & Workforce Transformation Policy Observatory (World Economic Forum)

As of CRPE’s latest tracking, 36 states have published or endorsed K–12 AI guidance; 14 have not. Among the states with guidance, the overwhelming majority (28) work to strike a balance between opportunity and risk. None is explicitly anti-AI, which tells its own story: the debate in every state has moved from whether AI belongs in schools to how.

Some states have produced comprehensive written guidance addressing student AI literacy, educator training, equity, and data privacy in real depth. **Utah** stands out by having the first state AI education specialist role and statewide vetted tool procurement. **Maryland** has gone further than any other state, pairing its [guidance](#) with a [law](#) that creates a standing AI education board, mandates funded educator training, and requires an outside university to certify tools against a state-published rubric.

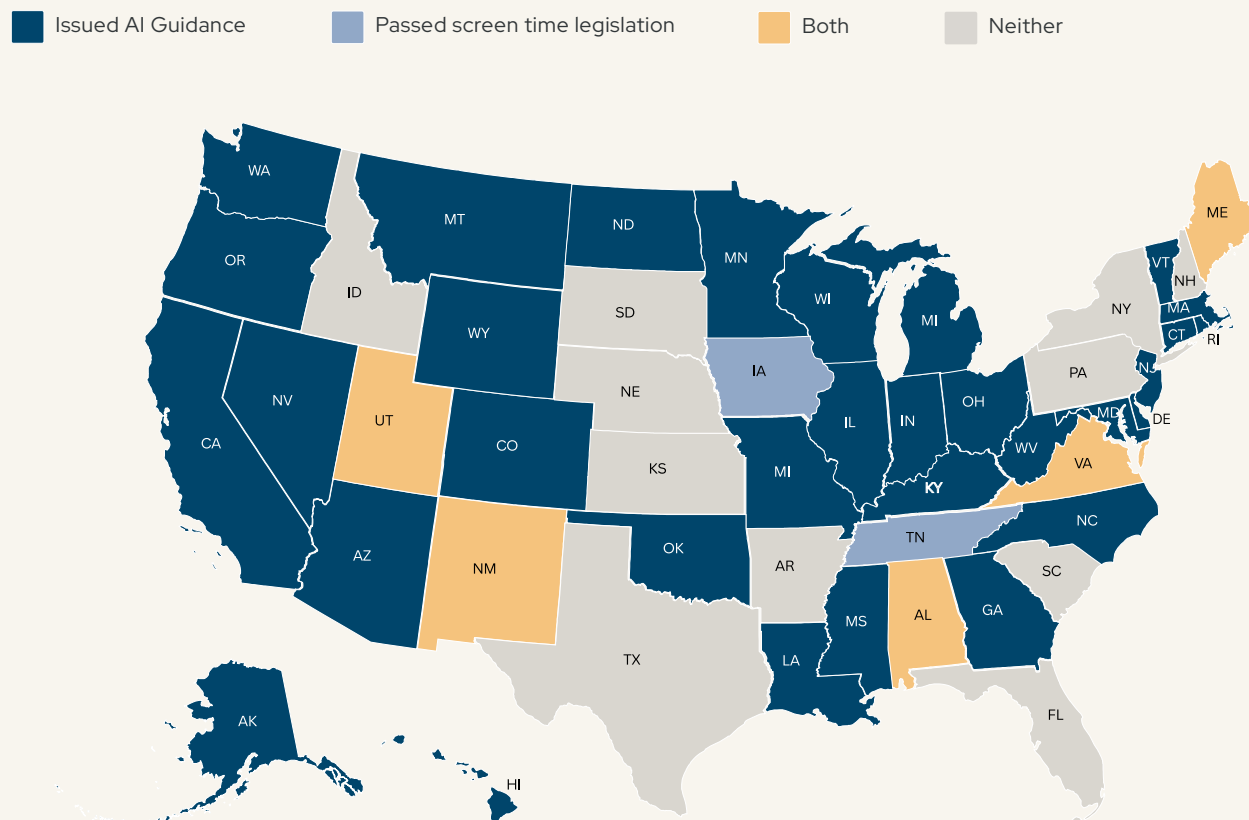


However, the growing movement to limit technology in schools is testing how states approach AI. **Utah**, despite producing thoughtful AI guidance, also passed a 2026 law that restricts K–3 screen time, making the state one of [seven](#) that enacted classroom screen-time restrictions in 2026 (see Figure 4). In September 2026, New York City and Los Angeles, the country’s two largest school districts, both announced new restrictions. New York’s [one-year moratorium](#) on AI tool use covers nearly 600,000 students through eighth grade and disables AI components in dozens of previously approved programs; Los Angeles [restricts student access](#) to generative AI tools on district devices across all grades. The pattern is not new: New York City Public Schools banned ChatGPT in January 2023, then [reversed course](#)

by May of that year after concluding the ban reflected “knee-jerk fear” that overlooked real promise. Whether this round will follow the same arc or mark a durable shift toward restriction is one of the more consequential open questions in K–12 AI policy.

FIGURE 4. 36 STATES HAVE ISSUED GUIDANCE ON AI IN K–12 SCHOOLS, EVEN AS SOME ALSO LIMIT CLASSROOM SCREEN TIME

States that have published AI guidance, passed legislation on screen time limits in K–12, neither, or both



EdWeek, CRPE Analysis (2026)

But guidance is not the same as policy and leadership. The majority of state guidance is not mandatory but advisory, such as frameworks that districts can use to build their own governance, develop their own training, or conduct their own tool review. Few states run or own any of these processes themselves, and almost none have mandated any part of their guidance or created state-run training and quality assurance oversight for AI instructional tools (with notable exceptions in **Maryland** and **Utah**).

Local control has deep roots in American education. But when it comes to AI, that means states are setting expectations without building the capacity or funding to help districts, especially the smallest and least-resourced ones, actually meet them.

"Automation applied to an inefficient operation will magnify the inefficiency."

Bill Gates in The Road Ahead, 1995

Underlying these guidance documents is a deeper problem. States are largely treating AI as something to layer onto the system they already have, not as an opportunity to rethink what that system should become. Almost none of the guidance we reviewed lays out an ambitious vision for what the future of teaching and learning could look like, names what students should know and be able to do as a result, or commits to building the policy, support, and evidence base to get there. Instead, most guidance effectively asks a narrower question: how do we use this new tool inside a system that we already know isn't serving students well enough? While privacy restrictions on classroom AI tools exist almost everywhere, a genuine vision for how AI can transform schooling exists almost nowhere.

Some states are barely in the game.

In literacy, math, career pathways, and AI policy, the national picture is one of uneven progress, but some states show almost no evidence of action across any of these four areas. Inaction isn't partisan: red states such as **Montana** and **South Dakota** appear alongside purple states like **New Hampshire** and blue states like **Illinois** and **New York** (see Table 2 on next page) among the states with the thinnest record of policy adoption in the areas we investigated.



TABLE 2. IN SOME STATES, EVIDENCE OF STATE POLICY ACTION IS THIN ACROSS MOST AREAS WE EXAMINED

Results from CRPE's fifty-state scan of policy activity; selected states with less evidence of policy action

INDICATOR	ILLINOIS	MONTANA	NEW HAMPSHIRE	NEW YORK	SOUTH DAKOTA
Statewide Learning Goal	No	Yes, Nonspecific	No	No	No
Literacy Law Passed	Yes	No	No	No	No
ExcelinEd Literacy Principles Adopted (out of 18)	0 "full" 2 "partial"	0 "full" 6 "partial"	2 "full" 5 "partial"	0 "full" 2 "partial"	0 "full" 4 "partial"
Teacher Preparation Policy Rating: Literacy	Weak	Unacceptable	Weak	Weak	Unacceptable
Math Law Passed	No	Yes	No	No	No
ExcelinEd Math Principles Adopted (out of 11)	0 "full" 6 "partial"	0 "full" 4 "partial"	0 "full" 3 "partial"	0 "full" 2 "partial"	0 "full" 2 "partial"
Teacher Preparation Policy Rating: Math	Weak	Unacceptable	Unacceptable	Weak	Weak
K-12 AI Guidance Issued	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
JFF Career Navigation Policies Implemented (out of 19)	8	6	4	4	5

Note: These states are illustrative examples. We did not create a composite score or rank states on overall action.

We don't know why progress is so uneven. States may be blocked by political gridlock, by state agencies without the bandwidth or expertise to act, or by dogmatic commitments to local control even as individual districts struggle. Higher-performing states may already have some key practices, infrastructure, or policy in place that have contributed to their success, or an earlier legacy of successful reform may have [dulled public will](#) for continued improvement.

Whatever the cause, these states are at less risk of pursuing the wrong combination of strategies than of having little strategy to speak of—a major problem when their performance is down, achievement gaps are growing, and all eyes are on state leadership to guide education into the future.

States leading in one area have gaps in at least one other.

Utah has developed some of the most thoughtful state guidance on AI in education and scores reasonably well on multiple literacy reform frameworks. But the state has no math law, is partially implementing only half of ExcelinEd’s recommended math policies, and has only about a third of JFF’s career navigation policies in place.

South Carolina has put a comprehensive set of literacy reforms in place. But the state hasn’t passed a math law or implemented a similarly robust set of math reforms, even though its published goal targets math improvement alongside reading.

Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi are among the states implementing the highest number of early literacy and math reforms. Still, all three have less than a third of JFF’s career navigation policies in place, even though Alabama’s and Louisiana’s goals name career preparation explicitly.

Washington shows the reverse: the state is a recognized [leader](#) on career navigation policy, but its policies for reading and math improvement are thin, with mostly “partial” implementation of only a handful of policies related to teacher support, assessment, and instruction. Meanwhile, Washington’s state board of education [aims](#) to increase fourth-grade reading and eighth-grade math proficiency to 90% by 2029, from a 2023 baseline of 49% and 32%, respectively. Assessment data from 2025 [shows](#) improvement of only a few percentage points in math, and less than half a percentage point in reading.⁷

Some states make a strong showing across multiple areas we examined. For example, **Maryland, Tennessee, Colorado, Indiana, and Virginia** have put in place fairly comprehensive literacy reforms and have more career navigation policies in place than most other states. All five states have passed a math law; all but one have issued guidance on AI in schools. Even so, each of these states has room for growth when it comes to establishing and implementing comprehensive policy.

⁷ Assessment results from 2024–25 show that 49.4% of fourth graders met or exceeded standards in reading, and 35.5% of eighth graders met or exceeded standards in math.

TABLE 3. EVEN STATES WITH A STRONGER POLICY RECORD HAVE MORE WORK TO DO

Results from CRPE's fifty-state scan of policy activity; selected states with relatively more evidence of policy action in most areas

INDICATOR	MARYLAND	COLORADO	INDIANA	VIRGINIA	TENNESSEE
Statewide Learning Goal	Yes, Specific and strongly signaled	Yes, Specific and strongly signaled	Yes, Specific and strongly signaled	No statewide learning goal	Yes, Specific
Literacy Law Passed	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
ExcelinEd Literacy Principles Adopted (out of 18)	5 "full" 2 "partial" 9 "future"	5 "full" 8 "partial" 1 "future"	7 "full" 11 "partial"	5 "full" 8 "partial"	9 "full" 6 "partial"
Teacher Preparation Policy Rating: Literacy	Moderate	Strong	Moderate	Strong	Strong
Math Law Passed	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
ExcelinEd Math Principles Adopted (out of 11)	1 "full" 7 "partial" 2 "future"	0 "full" 5 "partial"	5 "full" 4 "partial"	1 "full" 4 "partial"	1 "full" 7 "partial"
Teacher Preparation Policy Rating: Math	Weak	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
K-12 AI Guidance Issued	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
JFF Career Navigation Policies Implemented (out of 19)	10	8	7	12	11

Note: These states are illustrative examples. We did not create a composite score or rank states on overall action.

States may be strategically declining to pursue certain policies. The frameworks we used in our analysis are based on sound evidence, but states don't need to check every box on every framework to improve. In four key areas related to the outcomes that most states say they want, policy adoption is uneven, and implementation is likely incomplete. Every state has more to do.

Part 3



Where strategies diverge, they tend to split along partisan lines.

Passing and implementing education policy is a political endeavor. Increasingly, these efforts are also politically polarized, and this growing polarization is linked to evidence of problematic effects on student outcomes and teacher retention. For this reason, we investigated state policy adoption along partisan lines.

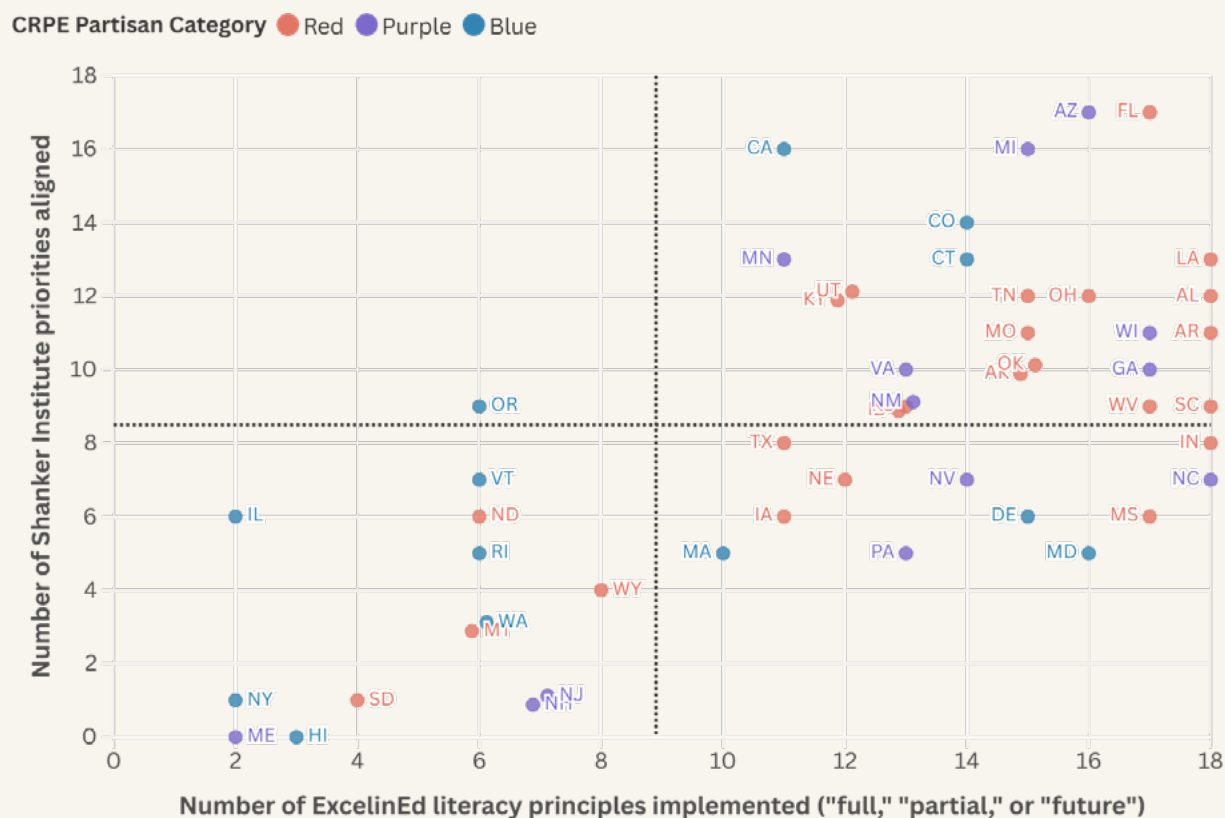
We began by analyzing partisan trends in the four areas covered in Part 2: literacy reform, math reform, career pathways policy, and AI guidance. Then, we layered on analysis of other particularly active areas of policymaking, including school choice, mental health and well-being, and cell phone bans, to understand how partisan trends in these areas shape our understanding of what states are doing to improve student outcomes (see the Technical Appendix for more details on our analysis).

Red states are taking the most aggressive action on instructional reform.

Literacy reform is bipartisan overall, but how aggressively states implement literacy reform is not. On two separate frameworks for literacy policy priorities (one from the [Albert Shanker Institute](#) and the other from [ExcelinEd](#)), on average, red states score higher, blue states score lower, and purple states score in the middle. The pattern also holds up state by state (not just on average). Among the states with low alignment to both literacy frameworks (see lower left quadrant in Figure 5), six are blue (46% of 13 total blue states), compared to three purple states (23% of 13 total purple states), and four red states (17% of 24 total red states). Meanwhile, among the states with high alignment to both frameworks (see upper right quadrant), only three are blue (23% of 13 blue states), compared to seven purple states (54% of 13 purple states) and 15 red states (63% of 24 red states).

FIGURE 5. ACROSS TWO LITERACY FRAMEWORKS, NEARLY HALF OF STATES THAT SCORE LOW ARE BLUE

Number of ExcelinEd's Early Literacy Fundamental Principles and Shanker Institute's literacy priorities implemented, by state and partisan lean



This rough sketch of policy adoption is not the full picture. The partisan split gets even sharper when it comes to ensuring alignment with the Science of Reading and enforcing consequences when students fall behind.

Red and purple states more often hold teacher prep programs accountable by requiring that licensure exams align with the Science of Reading. These states also eliminate three-cueing, a [debunked](#) instructional approach, more often. The National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) [found](#) that only 12 states have “strong” state policies to ensure effective teacher preparation in literacy, and eight of them are red states.

Red and purple states more often require evidence-based interventions and individual reading plans when students fall behind. They also more often use third-grade retention as an accountability tool. The evidence on whether retention actually helps students is [mixed](#), and retention policies carry a risk of temporarily inflating a state’s test scores without building a durable strategy for student support. Meanwhile, evidence-based interventions to support struggling readers, like tutoring, are [sensible](#) for every state, but remain less common in blue states.

Blue states, meanwhile, are more likely to address the needs of diverse learners explicitly in their literacy policies, often through culturally responsive instruction—an approach many conservative policymakers have opposed. This is a real strength that blue states bring to the table.

The same partisan split shows up more starkly in math. Of the 18 states that have enacted math bills since 2022, 13 are red (54% of all 24 red states), three are purple (23% of 13 purple states), and two are blue (15% of 13 blue states). Seven red states enacted math bills [incorporating](#) all of the priorities promoted by the still-nascent Science of Math movement, while none of

the blue or purple states’ bills incorporate all seven science of math priorities. Red states are also far ahead on requiring intervention for students struggling in math, according to ExcelinEd’s [Math Matters](#) tracker. NCTQ [rated](#) only two states—Alabama and Arkansas, both red—as having “strong” state-level math teacher preparation policies.⁸ While nearly all states have a long road ahead on math reform, the states moving the fastest lean red.



⁸ When NCTQ’s scan was initially published, only one state, Alabama, earned a “Strong” rating. But Arkansas passed legislation soon afterwards that improved its rating to “Strong.” NCTQ confirmed that both states earn this rating.

The partisan divide goes beyond instruction.

Beyond instructional reform, some policymaking areas are genuinely bipartisan: literacy in general, career pathways policies, and cell phone restrictions in schools (which now cover [at least 39 states](#) and DC, with [broad public support](#) across the political spectrum). Blue, purple, and red states alike have published AI guidance, though 10 of the 14 states yet to publish guidance are red (see [Technical Appendix](#)).

Two other major areas are sharply partisan: school choice, led almost entirely by Republicans, and student well-being and early learning, led almost entirely by Democrats.

These policy areas each have real gaps. Red states pushing the hardest on literacy and math instruction are, in many cases, simultaneously expanding private school choice without the accountability or transparency that would reveal whether these strategies are reinforcing each other or working against each other. Twenty states—16 red and four purple—have [enacted](#) Education Savings Accounts (ESAs) or education tax credits since 2019 (see Figure 6). **Arizona**, a purple state, expanded an existing ESA program to universal eligibility in 2022. Families deserve to make meaningful decisions about where their children go to school, but the evidence that unregulated or poorly regulated choice improves student outcomes is [thin](#).

In theory, red states' efforts to improve core instruction and simultaneously expand families' education choices could be mutually reinforcing. But in reality, they solve completely different problems and are perhaps even contradictory. **Tennessee**, a state we highlighted above for its strength across multiple policy areas, also [rolled back](#) its voucher program's testing requirements this year, making it nearly impossible to compare outcomes between public and voucher-funded students, even as some lawmakers push to expand voucher programs further.

Blue states have a different problem: prioritizing policies that address student well-being issues while tiptoeing around problems with classroom instruction. Of the 17 states that now [allow](#) mental health days as an excused absence from school, eight are blue and another six are purple; only three are red states (see Figure 6). According to CRPE's legislative analysis (see [Technical Appendix](#)), student well-being is the single most active area of Democratic-led policymaking in education: 72% of 561 well-being-related bills introduced since 2022 were sponsored by Democrats, touching on topics like counseling, suicide prevention, and school safety. Ten out of 13 blue states (77%) have enacted at least one well-being-related bill, compared to four of 13 purple states (31%) and eight of 24 red states (33%). Democrats also dominate in introducing bills related to early learning: six out of 13 blue states (46%) have enacted at least one Early Learning bill, compared to four of 13 purple states (31%) and five of 24 red states (21%).

Neither side has a full solution, and they're moving in different directions.

States are operating with fundamentally different theories of what needs to happen to improve education, and both sides of the partisan debate are facing fundamental problems. How will red states square aggressive instructional reforms with expanding unregulated private school markets funded with public dollars? Can lower-performing red states actually achieve top-performing status without investments in broader child well-being? How will blue states deliver big promises about academic improvement without enforcing evidence-based instructional practice and incentivizing progress? Will blue states with [strong unions](#) be able to advance more comprehensive reforms with [real consequences](#), including changes to teacher evaluation that unions generally [oppose](#)?⁹

These divergent theories of action may produce divergent results, and the jury is still out on which states' strategies will show lasting results. Many are taking note of the "southern surge" as **Alabama**, **Louisiana**, and **Mississippi**, historically low-performing, low-spending red states, have posted significant academic improvements in reading and math (even as Alabama and Louisiana [expanded](#) private school choice in 2024). On the other hand, **Florida**, with similarly comprehensive instructional reforms alongside a larger and fast-growing private school choice market, ranks [last](#) among states in reading recovery.

Among blue states, historic leader **Massachusetts** is slipping in the NAEP rankings and on KidsCount's child well-being scores, but still boasts a strong record when it comes to fostering child well-being overall—including educational outcomes. **Maryland** is modeling investment in overall child well-being, including through instructional reform, with [improved](#) reading performance since 2022. Meanwhile, after showing up as a higher-performing state in the 2000s, **Oregon's** NAEP outcomes have fallen well below the national average, and advocates in the state are [begging](#) for sensible policies on evidence-based instruction and accountability.



9 Using the same data sources we cite in this report, analysis by the Progressive Policy Institute [found](#) that red states with weaker unions tend to implement a more comprehensive literacy reform package, while blue states with stronger unions tend to implement fewer reforms.



Part 4



Variation between higher- and lower-performing states is growing.

It's not a good time to follow the party line—it's a good time to do what works.

The stakes are also higher because, for the first time this century, variation between states' academic performance is growing.

For years, the variation in academic achievement between states was shrinking.

The bipartisan standards movement and federal education policy in the 1990s and 2000s were built on a simple belief that students' educational outcomes should be less affected by where they live. Federal and state policymakers embraced accountability and standards-based reform as tools to raise achievement everywhere and close the gap between high- and low-performing districts and states.

For many years, those efforts appeared to pay off. Achievement rose, particularly in math, and some of the largest gains went to students who had historically been furthest behind. At the same time, variation in average performance between states was shrinking. But we are now seeing the opposite: declining achievement as well as growing variation, as measured by NAEP.

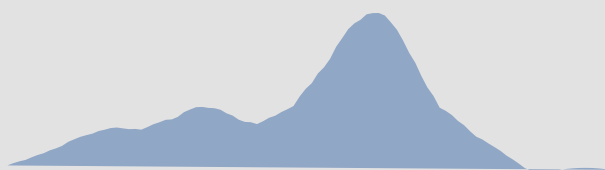
FIGURES 7 AND 8 TELL THE STORY IN TWO PARTS.



Each ridgeline represents the distribution of state average scores on NAEP eighth-grade math in a given year



A **ridgeline shifted to the right** means states are performing better overall



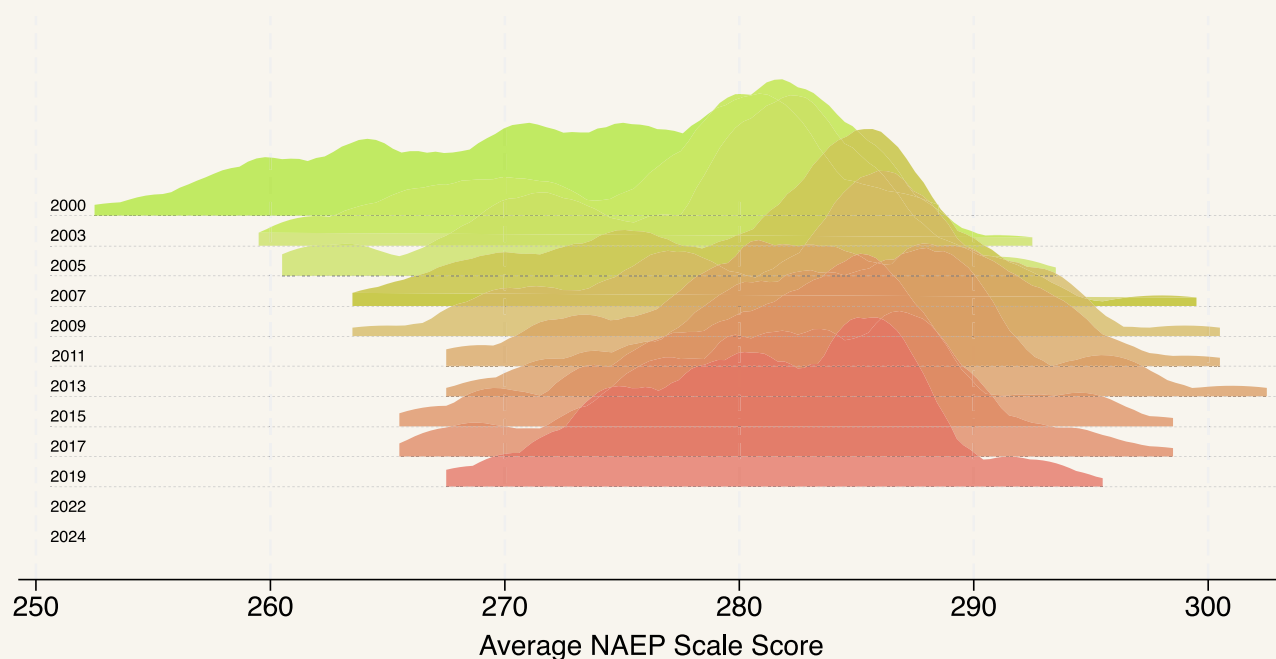
A **higher peak with a narrower base** means less variation between states

The achievement story is by now well known. From 2000 to 2013, the ridgeline shifted to the right, meaning better overall performance. After 2013, the ridgeline shifted to the left again, meaning overall achievement declined.

But throughout this period, from 2000 to 2019, the ridgelines in the figure progressively consolidated: variation decreased, meaning states' NAEP scores were still becoming more equal even as average performance fell.

FIGURE 7. UNTIL 2019, THE GAP BETWEEN HIGHER- AND LOWER-PERFORMING STATES WAS CLOSING

Density of 50 states' average scores in NAEP 8th-grade math over time, 2000-2019

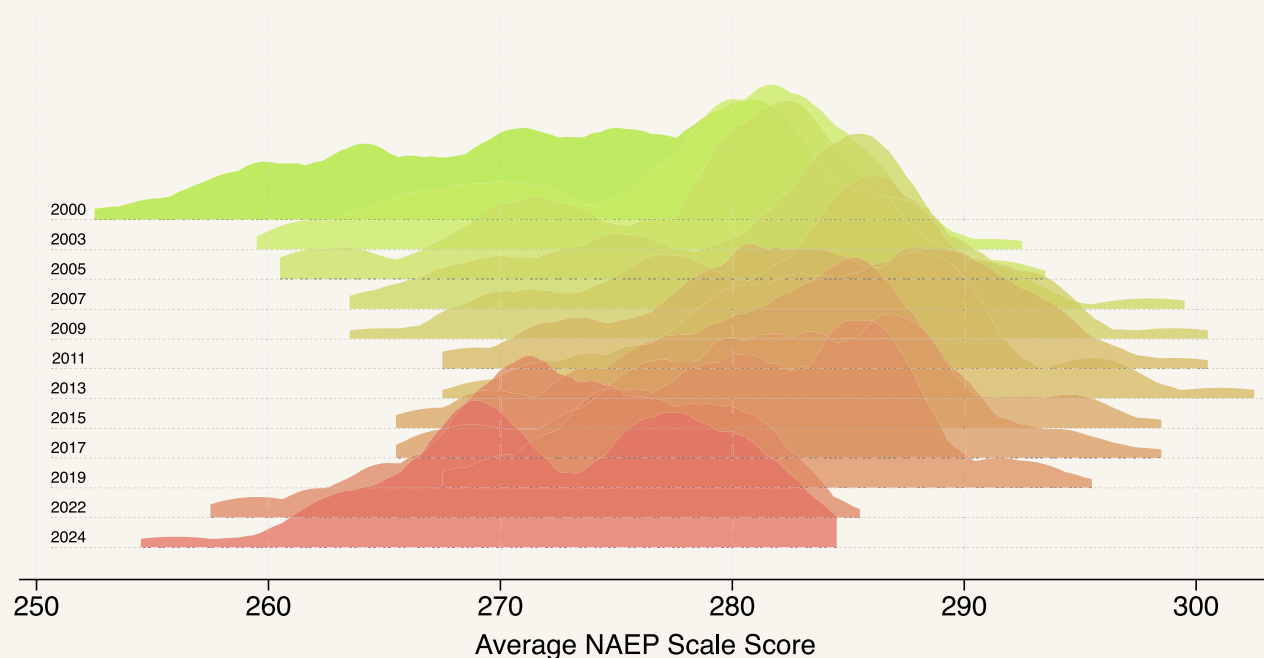


Since 2019, variation between states has begun to increase.

Then the pandemic reshaped the trend. By 2022, not only did scores sharply drop, but the ridgeline also widened and flattened. Variation between states had increased, in opposition to the pre-pandemic trend. In 2024, the pattern of declining performance and growing variation persisted.

FIGURE 8. SINCE 2019, VARIATION BETWEEN STATES HAS BEGUN TO INCREASE

Density of 50 states' average scores in NAEP 8th-grade math over time, 2000-2024

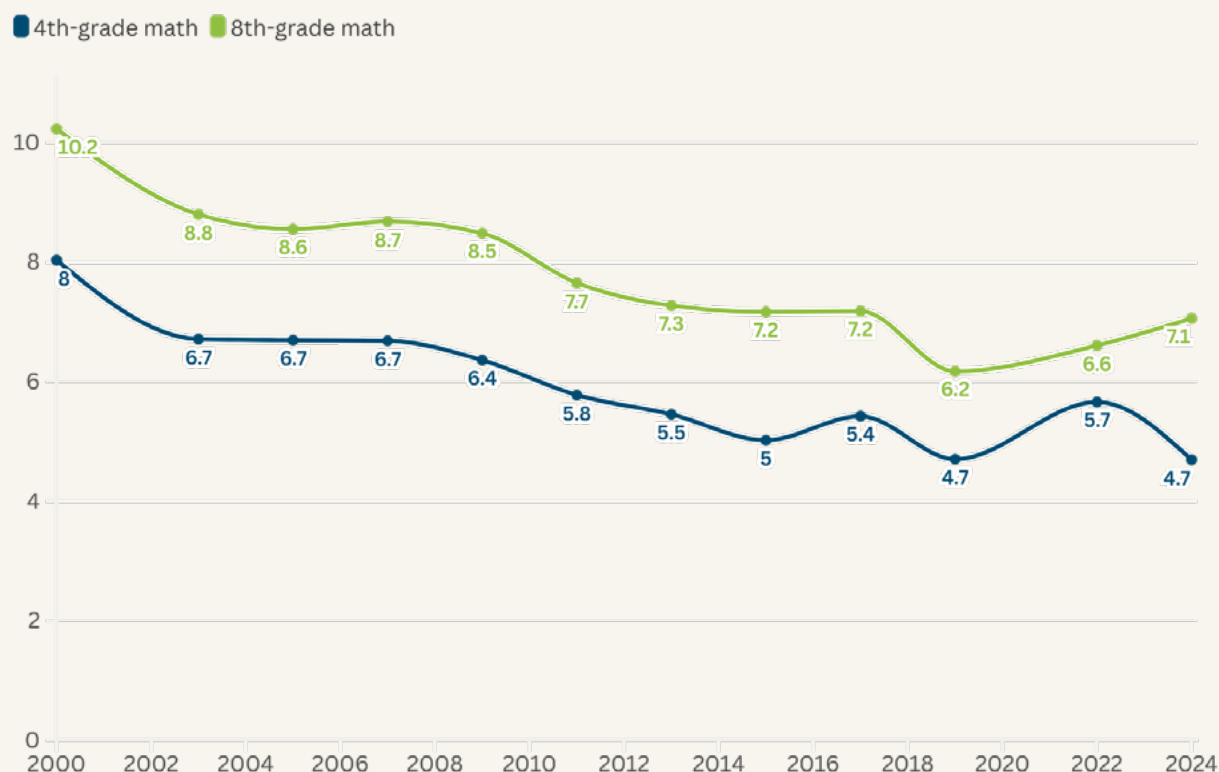


The trend is remarkably similar for fourth-grade math, with one important difference: after variation between states increased from 2019 to 2022, it returned to 2019 levels again in 2024. If the nation sustains the progress toward reduced variation, then there is hope, but a definitive positive trend isn't yet clear.

Another way to represent variation in state performance is by showing standard deviation, a calculation of the statistical spread between a set of numbers (see Figure 9). Until 2019, standard deviation among states' fourth- and eighth-grade math scores was decreasing, showing less spread. In 2022, it began to increase on both the fourth- and eighth-grade math tests, and in 2024, it continued increasing on the eighth-grade test.

FIGURE 9. THE VARIANCE BETWEEN STATE AVERAGE PERFORMANCE WAS STEADILY DECLINING UNTIL AROUND 2019

Standard deviation among average scores (each state weighted equally) for NAEP 4th- and 8th-grade math



The eighth-grade reading trend is remarkably similar to the eighth-grade math trend. On two consecutive NAEP tests since 2019, variation between states has grown. The fourth-grade reading trend is similar to the fourth-grade math trend, too (see the [Technical Appendix](#) for more information).

Growing variation means growing inequality.

“When you have a massive crisis, the worst effects end up being felt by the people with the least resources.”

Sean Reardon, Professor of Education, Stanford University (PBS)

A quarter century ago, the gap between higher- and lower-performing states was shrinking. Post-pandemic, that trend reversed. Student performance outcomes are not only worse than they were in the past, but also more unequal across geographies.

We don’t yet know why variation between states has grown, or what will counter the trend. Student outcomes lag behind policy, so we can’t say that states’ diverging improvement strategies are causing more unequal outcomes. But we worry that diverging, partisan improvement strategies will make inequality worse and unravel decades of progress.

What will it take to reverse the two troubling trends of declining national achievement and growing variation in student outcomes between states—and who will lead the charge?



What Needs to Happen Next

"The policy environment has not kept up with the pace of change, so the moment is now. We really need to light the fire of urgency around these issues."

Margaret Spellings, President of the Bipartisan Policy Center ([EdWeek](#))

This report began with the premise that state leadership and state policy matter for improving student outcomes and closing gaps, both between the highest and lowest performers and along lines of race, income, home language, and disability. It ends by concluding that most states do not yet have all the pieces in place to achieve the goals they are setting for themselves.

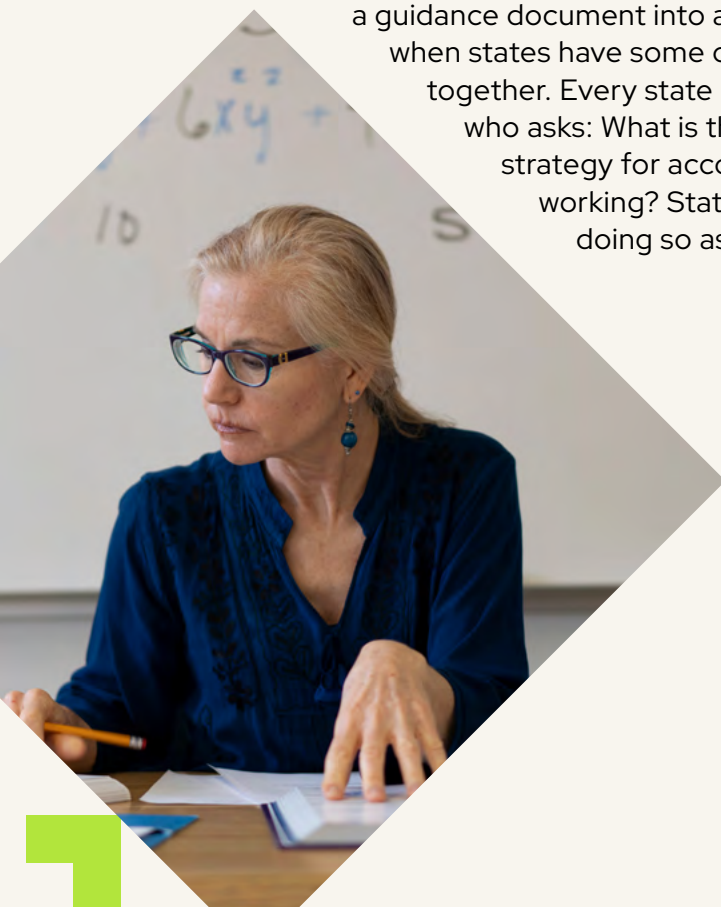
Partisan divergence makes the problem worse. A previously bipartisan commitment to accountability, standards-based reforms, and protections for vulnerable groups—all reforms aimed at improving instructional quality and equity—is eroding where it previously stood on solid ground, with federal muscle backing it up. School choice, also a previously bipartisan priority, is now increasingly the territory of ideologues. Even something as basic as student well-being has become politicized.

All of this is playing out on the surface as the ground shifts underneath. AI is already in nearly every classroom in the country, and while most states have issued guidance, almost none have built the capacity, funding, or quality standards needed to make that guidance meaningful in practice. If AI adoption continues to be a function of [district capacity](#) and [vendor](#) sales pitches, then the gaps between states (and the gaps between the most- and least-advantaged districts within states) will almost certainly widen. We cannot yet prove that AI is accelerating inequality, but we [know](#) that unequal access to technology tends to fall along lines of race, income, and geography. So far, state guidelines are not doing enough to keep that pattern from repeating.

The students who most need states to get this right have the least power to demand action. They deserve better, and that means state chiefs and elected officials, funders and advocates, national leaders, political organizers, and researchers must pursue five priorities.

1. State leaders: Audit your current improvement strategy, patch its holes (especially in math and AI), and focus on implementation.

This report only begins to investigate how states are working to improve student outcomes. A forthcoming CRPE report will dig deeper, with a scorecard on state improvement strategies. In the meantime, state leaders should audit their own policy and implementation gaps, then prioritize addressing them with a focus on the students with the most ground to make up, including students with disabilities and multilingual learners, not just the average student. Policies to improve math instruction are a gap almost everywhere. Comprehensive implementation of evidence-based literacy reform is another weak point for many states, as is quality assurance for work-based learning and statewide infrastructure for career navigation. Although most states have issued AI guidance, almost none can translate a guidance document into a statewide shift to future-ready schools. And even when states have some of the pieces in place, it's hard to tell how they fit together. Every state leader should be able to answer a parent or advocate who asks: What is this state trying to accomplish, what is the state's strategy for accomplishing it, and how will we know if the strategy is working? States that haven't articulated a clear strategy should treat doing so as the first order of business.



2. Funders and advocates: Hold states accountable for improvement strategies and follow-through to achieve their goals.

State agencies are historically capacity-strapped, and governors and legislators face incentives that reward activity and quick wins over the slow, unglamorous work that actually moves outcomes. But this can change if accountability systems evolve to [hold state leaders responsible](#) for defining clear goals and developing coherent strategies to help districts achieve them. In the meantime, funders and advocates have a critical role to play in ensuring that every state builds both the will and capacity to lead effective improvement. Advocates can act as primary scorekeepers for state improvement by building or demanding public dashboards that track targets and results, and by asking whether gains are reaching the students with the most ground to make up. Funders are the only actors positioned to build collective infrastructure by investing in knowledge-sharing across state agencies and advocacy organizations. They can also create coherence across a fragmented landscape of organizations that are working in parallel, often without coordination or a shared framework, to support state leaders.



3. National leaders: Over time, reimagine and reestablish the role of the federal government.

The federal government can't mandate states' improvement strategies, and its attempt to do so under No Child Left Behind was politically fatal. But a federal administration can lay out a vision, set expectations, and create the conditions for improvement. The nation needs a new federal strategy to help states quickly learn which combinations of policies and implementation supports are actually working. Renewed federal leadership should focus on three things:

- Investing in [R&D](#) (such as through the [NEED Act](#)) to accelerate learning about effective state strategies;
- Protecting the federal investments and accountability structures that matter most (civil rights enforcement, data collection, special education implementation); and
- Creating incentives that reward demonstrated improvement and innovation in states, not just expand autonomy.

4. Political organizers and strategists: Rebuild a genuinely bipartisan coalition for evidence-driven reform.

Education is increasingly partisan, and that makes improvement harder for everyone. Political organizers and representatives from both parties need to align around two things: what families actually want for their students, and what the evidence says works. This means moving past ideological positions to ask hard questions about whether chosen strategies are delivering results—and being willing to abandon them if they're not. There is some hope: a recent CRPE commentary from Democrats for Education Reform [pushed](#) Democrats to develop a more sophisticated reaction than knee-jerk opposition to new school choice policies. Similarly, the Fordham Institute has raised sensible ideas for accountability that would enable policymakers to see what happens to student learning when public dollars fund [private schools](#) and “à la carte” education services, and respond accordingly. It is possible for reasonable leaders to find common ground across the aisle.

5. Researchers: Grow the evidence base for effective, strategic state leadership.

We know a lot about what works at the school and classroom levels to improve student outcomes. But we know much less about how state-level strategies improve outcomes, which is part of why states implementing comprehensive evidence-based literacy reforms still show [mixed results](#). For state leaders looking for a playbook, the field can offer only a few bright spots and early glimmers. Researchers must produce evidence that serves policymakers and practitioners, not just academics, and they must do so on a faster timeline than research typically occurs. They need to sound the alarm when things aren't working, not just document the situation. Researchers should also dig deeper into the emerging signs of increasing variation between states, why variation is happening, and what can reduce the growing gap between higher- and lower-performing states.

Conclusion



State strategy gaps are wide enough to matter for a generation of students, and they risk getting wider without decisive action from state leaders, advocates, and funders.

The students who have the most to lose cannot wait for the politics to sort itself out or for years-long studies to show that it was a bad idea to let schools manage AI adoption without state-level support. Too many of these students are in school right now in states where leaders appear to be ambivalent towards growing inequality and declining achievement. This report is an attempt to make that choice, and its costs, visible.

