

PHOENIX RISING

Bold Ideas for States to Transform Public Education

SEPTEMBER 2026

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We stand at a precarious moment in American public education, and states are now in the driver's seat.

Pandemic-related learning losses and enrollment declines have been met with a federal retreat and fiscal pressures, leaving schools and districts to wonder how states will step in. As pressures mount between the rise of generative AI and the growing divisiveness around school choice, young people deserve decisive action. [*Phoenix Rising*](#), a series from the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE), asks: **How can we seize this difficult, heated moment to transform the K-12 education system for the better?**



Schools today face challenges that no one has a ready blueprint to solve: the lingering effects of the pandemic on student learning, declining enrollment, eroding trust in public institutions, and deep political discord that too often turns classrooms into battlegrounds. Add to that the disruptive force of artificial intelligence and the urgent need to reimagine high school for a changing economy, and **it's clear that the old approaches... aren't up to the task.**

Heather J. Hough, "A Truce in the Accountability Wars"

Burning down our public education system is not the answer, but neither [is blindly defending the status quo](#). This series, with contributions from experts and advocates across the political spectrum, identifies a provocative yet pragmatic set of ideas to get past the dysfunctions paralyzing improvement efforts and unlock large-scale improvement and principled innovation.

This series focuses on seven domains: **leadership coherence, accountability and assessment, research infrastructure, funding, teacher preparation, school choice, and high school redesign**. These are levers that states—education agencies, legislatures, boards, and governors’ offices—can actually control. States that act decisively across these domains are likely well-positioned to achieve large-scale improvement. States that respond with piecemeal fixes or crisis management will fall further behind.

The state levers in the collected articles are mutually reinforcing and offer a starting point toward a coherent state policy infrastructure for future-ready education where:

Students graduate ready to thrive in relationships, careers, and civic life.

Students get differentiated, evidence-based instruction that prepares them for an uncertain postsecondary landscape and an AI-driven job market.

Educators take on new roles that make their jobs more sustainable and effective. Evidence is a professional obligation, not an option.

Flexibility is a design principle, not an accommodation. Institutions and learning opportunities become more nimble and responsive. Schedules, staffing, spaces, and pathways flex to meet student needs rather than requiring students to fit institutional constraints.

Funding and governance models follows student and family needs and preferences, not siloed and outdated programs or staffing models.

Districts compete effectively in the realities of today’s choice landscape and proactively create space for innovation.

States commit to ongoing research and build accountability systems that prioritize the learning outcomes that matter most for student success.

Joy and rigor are not opposites. The false choice between academic excellence and human flourishing is rejected. A school that sees every child clearly can expect a great deal from them precisely because it understands what they are capable of.

It’s time for a new way forward, one that prioritizes students over politics and innovation over preservation. What follows is a synthesis of our key initial findings and recommendations for states and their supporters seeking to lead the charge toward renewal and reinvention.

1. A New Role for States: Coherence Over Compliance

THE PROBLEM

States now have the authority and the responsibility to keep their focus on students' success. But instead of implementing clear-eyed systemic shifts, states have primarily responded with retrenchment and crisis management. At the same time, district leaders do their best to manage the onslaught of daily challenges as they seek to work towards long-term improvement.

THE SOLUTION

States should assert their leadership to help schools and districts stay focused on transparent goals for raising student achievement by requiring districts to adopt evidence-based practices where research is strong, and where it is not, supporting new studies that fill knowledge gaps. States can use AI-enabled efficiencies and system improvements to reduce regulatory overhang and clarify which rules remain in place.

Clear out the noise by eliminating, deprioritizing, and minimizing the impact of other things that distract from your main goal. In Louisiana, we stopped doing training on anything that didn't align with our priorities, stopped giving districts money to do anything unaligned with our priorities, and even stopped emailing districts about anything that wasn't pertinent.

Kunjan Narechania and Jessica Baghian, “Three Ways SEAs Can Proactively Drive Change”

High-Leverage Ideas for States

- **Create relentless focus.** AI makes foundational skills more critical than ever. Choose 2-3 ambitious goals (e.g., literacy, numeracy, career readiness), align all state levers toward them, and treat well-being and durable skills (e.g., communication, critical thinking) as essential strategies—not add-ons—to get there.
- **Provide financial forecasting and legal guidance support.** Help districts navigate uncertainty from federal cuts, declining enrollment, and decreased state revenues.
- **Clarify and reduce regulatory expectations.** Modernize state educator standards to reflect changing jobs and technologies.
- **Create funding coherence.** Look for ways to make grants meet clear objectives, not random requirements or compliance. Where possible, consolidate state grants, requirements, and timelines.

2. Evolved Accountability and Assessment

THE PROBLEM

More than two decades after No Child Left Behind, states remain scarred by the “accountability wars,” which were characterized by punitive, top-down, high-profile requirements focused on blame rather than improvement. But laissez-faire local control has also failed to foster the learning outcomes our students need to thrive.

THE SOLUTION

Even though the draconian accountability measures of years past did little to drive student achievement, there is still a need for transparency, support, and consequences. States must recognize that parents need current data and clear communication to make decisions about their students’ schooling. Educators also need support to implement the evidence-based practices that can improve student outcomes. States can do more to help districts move from data diagnosis to implementing productive change by equipping them with specific mechanisms like structured improvement cycles and tiered state support with real escalation of consequences.

State report cards are a bewildering jumble that no one without an advanced degree in education policy could possibly comprehend.

Morgan Polikoff and Ashley Jochim, “America Can’t Be Great Without Good Schools”

High-Leverage Ideas for States

- **Implement a system of reciprocal accountability.** If we expect schools to deliver better results, then every level of the system must take responsibility for its part in supporting learning outcomes. Reciprocal accountability calls for a system where accountability and support aren’t separate functions, but are mutually reinforcing. Instead of top-down, punitive mandates, state, district, and school leaders work together to define common and meaningful goals, support one another to meet them, and learn quickly from what’s not working to build something better.
- **Couple authentic support with clear escalation protocols.** Develop and deliver a wraparound, case-management support approach tailored to each school or district’s needs, while using state authority to remove systemic barriers that impede progress. When districts cannot or will not improve, intervention should move from provider-level support to regional or state intervention, with increasing tiers of authority involved at each step.
- **Redesign public reporting for actual users.** Ensure parents making school choices have clear, current, comparable, and reliable information.
- **Go beyond test scores when diagnosing school and district performance.** Conduct regular, professional reviews similar to accreditation visits that provide a more comprehensive understanding of how schools and districts support teaching and learning.
- **Use common benchmarks for all publicly funded schools (district, charter, private schools receiving vouchers).** Common benchmarks help policymakers judge return on investment and help parents compare education options.

3. An Ongoing Commitment to Research and Development

THE PROBLEM

Without robust systems for gathering evidence about what works and testing and improving new ideas, educators expend precious time and energy creating “new” solutions when they already exist, or perpetuating practices already proven ineffective. The labor market and frontiers of learning are changing faster than governments, districts, and institutions of higher education will be able to understand, unless they develop better research infrastructure.



THE SOLUTION

States can prioritize and invest in R&D systems and structures that enable accountability, choice, integration of AI, teacher preparation, high school design, and more to be engines of coherence-building rather than disparate distractions. States should think ambitiously about how AI can leverage evidence about what works in order to identify problem areas and support student learning precisely.

We need more schools, of every type, as education R&D partners. When teachers and students are partners in design and testing, the resulting solutions are more impactful and practical.

Auditi Chakravarty, “Meeting the AI Moment Requires a New Education R&D Infrastructure”

High-Leverage Ideas for States

- **Invest in sustained research and evaluation.** Build state capacity to assess whether AI interventions and new strategies are working regularly, identify barriers to progress, and course-correct based on evidence. Bring stakeholders together to develop and fund relevant, rigorous research prioritizing research-practice partnerships over highly specialized journal publications.
- **Prioritize studies of efficacy and access.** Ensure diverse representation in datasets and prioritize evaluation effects on historically underserved populations.
- **Insist (via procurement and other rules) that technology developers leverage evidence-based practices.** Be transparent about rigorous studies of effectiveness, especially with historically marginalized populations.

4. Portable and Flexible Funding Systems

THE PROBLEM

In public education, proven practices and good ideas rarely scale or reach the students most in need of them because funding follows staff and programs, not student needs. This is by design, not by accident. When money is siloed into programs in this way, it creates institutional constraints that stifle creative, student-centered solutions. Further, pension plans and other compensation systems are not aligned with modern, effective staffing strategies.

THE SOLUTION

States should ensure that public funds can be used portably and flexibly to best meet the needs of students and families.

Without taking action, pension costs will continue to eat up larger shares of school budgets. That, in turn, will make teaching less attractive to new entrants and preserve a benefit structure that protects only the longest-serving veterans.

Chad Aldeman, “Pension Costs are Draining School Budgets”

High-Leverage Ideas for States

- **Ensure money follows students.** Funding should enable, rather than constrain, innovation by following the students to schools or programs they attend, with weights for student need.
- **Stop adding new workers to current pension plans.** Instead, states should create new, portable benefit plans for all incoming workers via defined benefit or cash balance plans.
- **Focus state grant and program funds.** States should make the right choice clearer and easier through every possible means, including minimizing the hoops districts need to jump through to access state funds that support bold visions for achieving student-outcome objectives.
- **Revamp funding to treat grades 11-14 as a continuum.** Reward and fund real-world preparation for students, including credential attainment, work-based learning hours, and job transitions, rather than just enrollment.

5. Remake Teacher Preparation and the Profession

THE PROBLEM

The ways we prepare, pay, and protect teachers are woefully out of date, crippling districts and threatening student success.

THE SOLUTION

Colleges of education should become nimble partners with states and districts, solving for variance in learning, rather than acting as credential mills. In states with strong unions, teachers' unions need to stop threatening strikes for unaffordable settlements, allow differentiated pay, quit fighting charters, concede on pension reform, and lead on career-relevant high schools and evidence-based instruction.



Image courtesy of Mary Lou Fulton College for Teaching and Learning Innovation

Colleges of education are no longer the only option for would-be teachers, and it's time we realize it. Today, we face increasing competition from alternative programs offered by for-profit and nonprofit organizations, school districts, and even teachers' unions. **Colleges of education can—and must—do better.** Deans, faculty, college presidents, and states should lead the transformation.

Carole Basile and Robin Lake, “Remaking Ed Schools from the Ground Up”

High-Leverage Ideas for States

- **Create and enforce statewide standards for teacher preparation.** Certification should be aligned with evidence-based information on how children learn.
- **Support efforts to reimagine teaching.** Consider options to refresh the profession through grants, regulatory flexibility, and research-practice partnerships.
- **Encourage collaboration between ed schools, districts, and communities to co-design workforce pipelines.** Partnerships include reshaping staffing models, integrating AI tools, and offering training for team-based structures to transform into demand-driven systems.
- **Legislate that contracts cover compensation and benefits only.** Prevent bargaining over class size, curriculum, staffing assignments, or other operational issues to maintain district autonomy.

6. Principled School Choice

THE PROBLEM

Too often, discussions of school choice are grounded in political rhetoric rather than issues of learning. Without investment in the conditions that enable equitable access to school choices, such as clear communication with families and consistent access to transportation, school choice programs result in an oversupply of schools in some neighborhoods while critical needs remain underserved elsewhere. Often, the lowest-income families and families of students with special education needs don't access choice at all. At a time when the explosion of ESAs and the use of AI will soon make almost infinite learning choices possible, districts that can't compete risk becoming the option of last resort.

THE SOLUTION

States need to focus on fair competition and access, as well as common, transparent accountability standards. School choice is already mainstream and growing in popularity in many states. The question is not whether school choice will continue to shape education policy, but whether it will be implemented well or poorly and whether it will decrease or exacerbate opportunity gaps.



America's school districts serve a shrinking share of a shrinking market, as the overall K-12 population declines, families leave high cost cities, homeschooling explodes, private school enrollment recovers, and charter school enrollment keeps growing... States need a new playbook to support districts in this era—and push them to evolve.

Robin Lake and Travis Pillow, “District Competition in the Age of School Choice”

High-Leverage Ideas for States

- **Invest in family engagement and communication.** Families and communities need to know how to access reliable information about which options exist.
- **Build unified enrollment and information systems.** Consider the user experience people have when comparison-shopping for cars or computers online. Parents and families should have access to a similar streamlined experience when choosing K-12 schools, with all options displayed side-by-side next to clear indicators of performance, transportation, and seat availability.
- **Invest in choice market enablers, like transportation subsidies.** Choice must be practically accessible, not just theoretically available. ESA or voucher programs that cover tuition but ignore transportation exclude the families they seek to empower.
- **Help districts compete for students.** Share enrollment strategies and identify revenue-generating services, especially in states with ESA programs.
- **Maintain quality district schools through transparent, stable funding.** Even in choice-heavy states (Arizona, Florida, Ohio), the majority of students remain in district schools.

7. Future-Ready High Schools



THE PROBLEM

At a moment of vastly accelerated technological change, an uncertain labor market, and global shifts, our high schools largely look the same as they did a century ago. High school requirements, which were last overhauled in the 1980s, remain set in stone, giving students little preparation for the job market they'll face as adults. Model pockets of innovation exist, but have failed to proliferate at any significant scale.

THE SOLUTION

States should work with industry, higher-education leaders, and others to rethink high school graduation requirements and the shape of the high school experience.

The labor market is changing faster and more unpredictably than governments, school districts, and higher education can handle. AI is rewriting the rules overnight...States that manage to blur the sharp separation between K12 schooling, higher education, and workforce training will flip the script.

Joel Vargas, “The ‘Big Blur’: A Renewed Call to Merge High School, College, and Career

High-Leverage Ideas for States

- **Rethink high school course requirements using a “zero-based budgeting” approach.** Start from scratch, require evidence for each mandate, and consider whether AI makes some requirements obsolete while calling for new ones.
- **Accelerate access and scaling for work-based learning.** Establish quality standards for youth apprenticeships/internships, seed funding for intermediaries, and remove regulatory barriers that discourage employer participation.
- **Harness the potential of precision learning to staff high schools differently.** In an AI-enabled precision learning model, schools would deploy differentiated teams, with some adults specializing in diagnostics and data interpretation and others in instruction, mentorship, or intervention. This shift requires states to fundamentally rethink the role of the high school teacher, including certification requirements and salary schedules.

From Crisis to Transformation

The current moment for public education is pivotal: [old certainties have collapsed](#), but new possibilities remain unbuilt. States that act on these ideas as a cohesive vision, rather than piecemeal, are the ones most likely to achieve transformation. At the same time, states need a roadmap, clear milestones, and means to assess progress and adjust along the way. The ideas in the Phoenix Rising series outline the map, and we will continue to work with states and their supporters on the journey.

The alternative to transformation isn't stability. It's continued decline, eroding trust, and widening inequity. Nearly every paper in the series sounds the clarion call to state leaders, summarized by [Heather Hough](#): **[“This is not the easy path, but if we can summon the courage and leadership to take it, then we can finally move beyond the old \[barriers to\] deliver the schools—and the future—our students deserve.”](#)**

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We acknowledge the thoughtful contributions to the Phoenix Rising series from the many authors, working group participants, and reviewers who helped shape the individual articles cited in this synthesis. We are grateful to our wonderful colleagues at CRPE for their support of the Phoenix Rising series. This publication in particular benefited from editing assistance from Abby Jacobs and Melissa Fall, and project management from Nadja Michel-Herf and Caitlin Lennon. Emily Prymula created the beautiful design and layout. We also extend our appreciation to the Valhalla Foundation and the Walton Family Foundation, whose support made this work possible.

ABOUT CRPE

The Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) is a research organization at Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton College for Teaching and Learning Innovation, where transformative ideas are rigorously examined and tested, and research informs action. Since 1993, we have remained independent of any single ideology while holding firmly to our core belief that public education is a goal—to prepare every child for citizenship, economic independence, and personal fulfillment—and not a particular set of institutions. From that foundation, we study what it will take for public education to meet every student's needs and use those insights to inform meaningful changes in policy and practice. Learn more about our work at crpe.org.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Wolfe, Rebecca E. and Robin Lake. *Phoenix Rising: Bold Ideas for States to Transform Public Education*. (Tempe, AZ: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2026).