

II. Why we must act now

The challenges are likely to get more difficult for at least four reasons.

First, the looming fiscal cliff. If present trends continue, school systems will have higher costs and less funding to cover them in coming years. Inflation has driven up the cost of supplies and staff salaries. High interest rates intended to curb inflation mean that new loans used to finance school construction, repairs, or new technology purchases will be more expensive.

Nearly \$200 billion in federal pandemic relief funding will expire in January 2025. In school districts around the country, [enrollment has plummeted](#) with little signs of bouncing back, further exacerbating financial challenges. This fiscal double whammy means that local schools will have less funding in future years unless states increase per-student spending, which seems unlikely, given their own fiscal pressures.

“We’re actually calling 2024-25 ‘the bloodletting.’ Public education has not seen [a fiscal cliff] of this magnitude at any time in the past, including the last recession.” –Marguerite Roza, director, Edunomics Lab at Georgetown University

Second, system burnout. Even more daunting, the fiscal cliff will come on top of an already exceptionally challenging environment for educators, which has worsened since the pandemic. By their own accounts, educators and system leaders have been struggling to address student needs and focus on instruction in the midst of staffing challenges, political fights, and overall fatigue and burnout.

Leaders in four out of the five school systems CRPE [has been studying](#) throughout the pandemic described higher levels of teacher burnout and a subsequent “erosion of professional expectations” among teachers. As one leader said, “I do think the first and foremost issue is, ‘Do we have enough high-quality teachers in our schools to do this work?’ And the answer is no right now for us.”

Teacher shortages likely will worsen in coming years. A recent [analysis](#) by Chalkbeat showed that all 15 states in their study saw an uptick in teacher turnover in the 2022-23 school year. Even more concerning, perhaps, is that the [number of people](#) training to become teachers has fallen from a peak of 700,000 in 2009 to just over 400,000 in 2020.

*“We are in an acutely serious and severe moment for the health of the teaching profession.”
–Matthew Kraft, Brown University researcher*

As a result, in many parts of the country, leaders will face public pressure to keep existing schools open and current staffing levels constant. Although the pandemic has made innovation more imperative than ever, it will be understandably difficult for school leaders trying to keep their heads above water to simultaneously brainstorm new approaches.

Third, societal changes are ratcheting up the demands on the next generation of graduates. As CRPE has [written](#) for several years, the education system and or students face unprecedented change and uncertainty. The most dire predictions are that artificial intelligence and automation, climate change, and other geopolitical forces will unleash massive disruption, growing inequality, and job loss. New jobs will be created to replace obsolete ones, but will favor skills—such as empathy and creativity—that only humans possess. Change and uncertainty will be the new normal. Employment opportunities will shift quickly, requiring adaptability and constant retooling. Automation will affect everyone, but middle-class jobs will be harder to find, making it harder to overcome the



disadvantages of poverty. The need will be greater than ever for talented innovators, entrepreneurs, and civic leaders. Public school attendance, high school graduation, and now a college degree have become de rigueur for anyone seeking a middle-class job. The jobs of the future will likely continue to increase these demands, and the question is whether our education system can keep up.

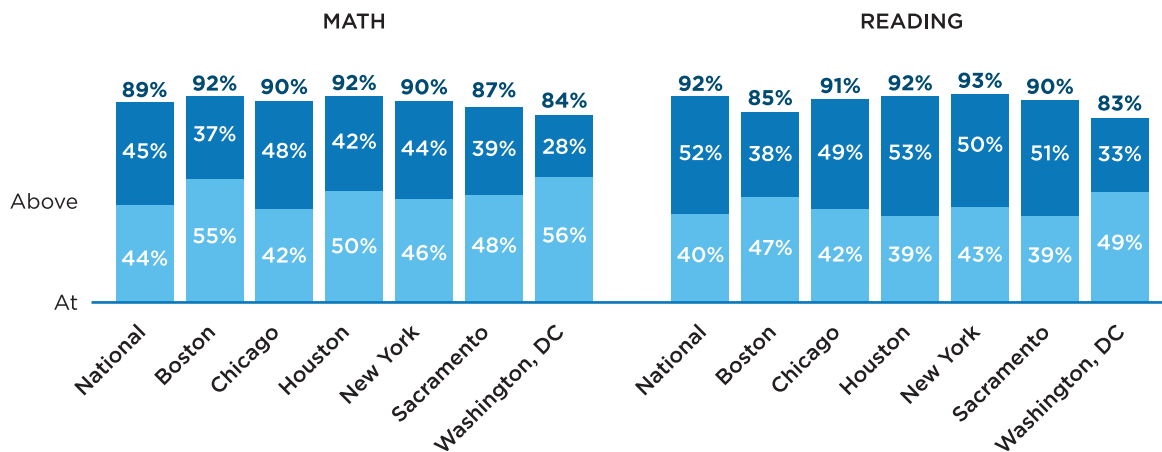
Persistent achievement gaps and high rates of student failure in higher education show how far our education system falls short of meeting even yesterday’s challenges. Our education system is even less prepared for a more demanding and unpredictable tomorrow. It is no longer enough for students to stay in school and expect to enter a well-defined career. Graduates will need to understand the local economy well enough to both judge their own strengths and weaknesses and seek needed skills and experiences. For that to be possible, students will need common skills and understandings—literacy, numeracy, and basic knowledge of science, history, and civics. But the future education system will also need to broaden their opportunities for learning and growth, help them gain applied knowledge in areas where they have particular abilities and interests, and allow them to create customized educational and career pathways.

“I think just upholding the basic quality of education to be able to have equal education across student groups is something that also needs to be [focused] on. To make sure that everyone knows the same stuff, or at least the same basic concepts. I think that’s something that school currently is failing at in part.” –Arshia Papari, rising freshman, University of Texas at Austin

Fourth, most parents and the public are unaware of the severity of these challenges. Policymakers continue to peddle the currency of denial. Politicians don’t want to talk about how serious the learning gaps are, thus leaving parents in the dark. Grades and report cards do not reflect student subject mastery. Most governors have dodged the subject. As a result, parent surveys show a wide belief gap between what they perceive and what the data show.

According to one spring 2022 survey by researchers at the University of Southern California, less than one quarter (23%) of parents were interested in summer school, and just over a quarter were interested in tutoring (28%). Another survey by [Learning Heroes](#) reported that about 90% of parents believe their child is working at grade level or above (see Figure 9 below), despite reams of data to the contrary.

Figure 9. Percentage of parents who believe child is at/above grade level



Source: [Learning Heroes](#).

For understandable reasons, schools and districts are largely doing what they have always done, despite the fact that it is not enough. As this report has noted, few are offering the interventions proven to be most effective in catching students up, instead choosing to spend precious federal funding on staff that will have to be laid off when the fiscal cliff appears.

All of this means it will get harder for schools and systems to sustain their existing initiatives—much less intensify their efforts or launch new ones—especially without sustained pressure from parents, the public, and other stakeholders. Without fundamental changes in how education systems operate and use resources, many students will receive less instruction and support two years from now than they do today.

That is, unless we stop doing what demonstrably doesn't work.

We all know the quote (attributed to Albert Einstein): “The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.”

Abraham Lincoln's exhortation to Congress in 1862 is also familiar and relevant: “The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, we must think anew and act anew.”

Winston Churchill offers one more piece of timely wisdom: “A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty.”

It's time for the optimists to step up.

