



# America Can't be Great Without Good Schools: Here's How Policymakers Can Create More of Them

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Policymakers have long understood that the success or failure of the publicly financed education system casts a long shadow, shaping the lives of parents and non-parents, employers and workers, immigrants and native-born alike. While schools have always struggled to deliver what their communities count on them to provide, those struggles have reached a new crescendo.

The Nation's Report Card has documented the erasure of a decade of improvement and the widening of gaps between the educational haves and have-nots. Bullying, widespread behavioral problems, and a youth mental health crisis threaten millions of children's opportunities to learn and undermine families' faith in schools to protect the most vulnerable in their care. Escalating financial challenges and a crisis in the teaching profession threaten to weaken further schools' capacity to solve these problems.

Democrats and Republicans at all levels of government have failed to offer a serious response to these challenges. Republicans have continued to focus their attacks on public schools for "indoctrinating" young people with "woke" ideology. Their antidote—advancing private school choice and parents' rights initiatives—will do nothing to strengthen public schools' capability or capacity to deliver what the public relies on them to provide. Democrats, meanwhile, can't be bothered to say much of anything, preferring instead to defend the system as it exists today and lobby for the additional resources they believe it needs.

Reasonable people can disagree about both the threats and opportunities presented by each party's position, but both are liable for neglect: in failing to acknowledge and act upon the real challenges that exist in public schools, policymakers have left families and communities to negotiate these struggles on their own.

We do not have to accept a future in which public education is permanently weakened and unable to deliver consistently for American families. Overcoming partisan divisions and avoiding the mistakes of past education reform efforts will not be easy. However, real progress is possible if we focus on strengthening public education's capability to deliver what families and communities need the most: providing children, no matter their circumstances, a springboard to the future they actually want.

Delivering on this aspiration requires policymakers to close the gap between what students and families want from public schools, what public schools have historically made available to them, and what policymakers spend their time and energy addressing. Today, this gap is larger than ever, thanks to the influence of interest groups and partisan elites whose policy priorities often diverge dramatically from the needs of children and families—public education's core users and beneficiaries. What follows are concrete steps to close that gap.

## 1. Take a reasonable middle ground in the culture wars.

Perhaps nowhere is the partisan divide sharper right now than in the pitched culture war battles roiling schools. Since 2021, Republicans have been engaged in an all-out war on LGBTQ+ and race-related issues in schools, first focusing primarily on Critical Race Theory and more recently on trans issues. Under the banner of “parents’ rights,” these attacks have included restrictions on the curriculum materials and books teachers can use and the defunding of diversity-related efforts in school districts, making teachers increasingly fearful of discussing these topics in the classroom. With students of color now the majority in K-12 schools nationwide, the idea of stripping the curriculum of anything culturally relevant is untenable and harmful.

On the other hand, Democrats and the education establishment have often blithely ignored parents’ real concerns about age-appropriateness, especially around sex and gender issues, and their desire for a school experience free from what they see as left-wing indoctrination. High-profile antics like a [pro-Palestine teach-in](#) are hardly the way to convince parents across the political spectrum that their views will be respected in public schools. [Surveys have shown](#) that parents are squeamish about including fraught issues in the elementary curriculum and crave a balanced approach for older children.

Our public schools must be places where families of all backgrounds are welcome—no matter their race, religion, or political views—and this is true in both blue and red states. Both Republicans and Democrats are responsible for making this a reality.

This requires policies and practices that teach children the [fundamentals of civics](#)—knowledge about American government and history, appreciation for civil discourse and diverse viewpoints, and the skills and agency to engage in the polity effectively. We need policies and practices that support schools to employ sensible ideas about

which issues kids are ready to discuss, as well as when, how, and towards what end. We need curricula that are historically and scientifically accurate, grapple with the real consequences of race- and class-based discrimination, and document America's steady but fitful progress toward addressing past injustices. We need to prepare teachers to impart lessons from history and discuss current events without making any child feel unwelcome in their classroom.

This means supporting common-sense, reasonable, centrist, debate-focused curricula like the [Educating for American Democracy](#) project. It also means being more tolerant of diverging views on sensitive topics and allowing parents to opt out of topics they feel are inappropriate for their children. In sum, we need policies that help schools bridge, not accelerate, our divisions and that work to bring Americans together as one nation and people.

As part of this effort, both left and right must accept that schools are responsible for supporting their students' social and emotional well-being. This means promoting a culture of respect and civility and acting on behavior that undermines that culture, including those perpetuated on the basis of sex, gender, sexual orientation, race, culture, religion, language, or socioeconomic status. As most parents already know, fostering a culture like this does not require schools to engage in either left- or right-wing indoctrination; it simply means teaching children to be polite and holding them accountable for demonstrating the behavior expected of them.

### What policymakers can do:

- **Establish** clear statewide guidelines for age-appropriate content in core academic subjects and ensure these guidelines are followed by holding accountable those who violate them.
- **Support** the adoption of history and civics standards and curriculum that prepare children for the demands of citizenship, focusing on civic knowledge, respect for diverse views, and the agency to participate in civic life.
- **Create** model opt-out policies that offer concerned parents relief while encouraging curricula and messaging that discourage opting out.

## 2. Invest in systems that keep students safe.

Schools have little chance of educating children if they cannot first keep them safe. While gun violence and strategies for addressing it often receive the most attention and provoke the most controversy, other threats to students' physical and emotional well-being affect many more schools, families, and students. According to the [National Center for Education Statistics](#) (NCES), 67% of schools reported at least one incident or threat of violence, but only 14% of these involved a weapon of any kind. Concerns about [bullying](#), [verbal abuse of teachers](#), and [disorderly classrooms](#) are also widespread. Perhaps as a result, [families report](#) that school safety is a problem and should be a top priority for schools.

Unfortunately, efforts to keep children safe in school have been politicized by both the left and the right. On the left, well-intentioned attacks against the role of school discipline in perpetuating the “school-to-prison pipeline” have often resulted in blanket discipline bans—an approach that neither addresses the root causes of challenging behavior nor meaningfully advances solutions to it. Predictably, this has left children who have behavioral challenges without the support they need. It has also failed to protect students and teachers from the consequences of behavioral challenges, including bullying, harassment, and disorderly classrooms, contributing to both [student and teacher absenteeism](#).

Education leaders on the right, in turn, have responded with their own prescriptions, such as mandating the return of problematic “zero tolerance” policies and loosening rules related to the use of physical restraint on children. Sweeping students with disciplinary problems out of the system via suspension, expulsion, or placement in alternative schools that often provide nothing more than glorified babysitting is no way to help children do better. It also ignores the fact that behavioral challenges in schools are widespread. One in every five children is identified with an emotional or behavioral health disorder by the age of 18. This rate increases in schools serving low-income children who are more likely to experience these challenges due to [routine exposure](#) to abuse, violence, and other [adverse childhood experiences](#).

Schools cannot reliably secure families’ confidence by meting out punishments without concern for emotional well-being, home lives, or disability status, nor can they succeed by simply tolerating misbehavior, regardless of its consequences for teachers and other children. Families’ and teachers’ sense of safety hinges on both orderly classrooms and positive relationships between students and adults.

Existing evidence suggests that significant work is needed on these fronts. [Principals complain](#) that teachers are not prepared to handle student misbehavior, and a [significant number](#) of teacher preparation programs fail to provide teachers with meaningful opportunities to learn and practice evidence-based classroom management strategies. Teachers, in turn, point to the [lack of backup](#) for behavioral challenges, including inconsistent policies and a lack of support staff capable of helping. The solution to both these problems is investments in stronger preparation programs that provide staff the knowledge and skills needed to manage student behavior effectively—something states could directly influence via requirements for teacher and leader preparation programs, certification requirements, and licensing exams.

In addition to investing in educators’ capabilities, state and district decision-makers must better align their efforts to promote safe and orderly classrooms with evidence of what actually works. This starts with better monitoring. Though students and staff have a front-row seat to safety and order in their schools, just [eight states](#)—California, Delaware, Illinois, Georgia, Maryland, Massachusetts, Nevada, and New York—regularly assess their perceptions of school safety. Fewer still have any system in place to encourage schools to use [evidence-based practices](#) or intervene when schools fail to reliably keep children safe.

Schools that serve large numbers of students at risk for behavioral challenges are likely to need additional support to address widespread, long-standing threats to children’s physical and emotional well-being. Evidence from charter schools suggests that schools purpose-built to serve at-risk students, like [Haven Academy](#) in New York,

invest in intensive and interdisciplinary student support systems—deploying social workers, mental health therapists, and applied behavior analysts to complement and support the efforts of teachers and administrators. While [pundits](#) suggest these efforts dangerously expand schools' missions, schools cannot succeed if they simply ignore the behavioral health challenges that affect children's readiness to learn. Policymakers should support investments in intensive, evidence-based behavioral health support in public schools, not because schools need a new mission but because this is part of their existing one.

### What policymakers can do:

- **Abandon** counterproductive prescriptions that unilaterally impose disciplinary standards, whether to prevent or encourage punitive discipline.
- **Adopt** statewide initiatives that encourage and support the implementation of evidence-based behavior management strategies, including requirements for preparation programs to equip new teachers and leaders to use them and professional development for existing teachers and principals.
- **Measure** students, families, and teachers' perceptions of safety in school, report that data publicly, and take action when such data suggest that schools fail to reliably keep students or teachers safe.
- **Avoid** policies and programs that set arbitrary discipline standards or ratios, as well as those that value data on suspension or expulsion above other meaningful measures of school climate.
- **Disaggregate** school safety data to ensure school discipline systems treat students and families of all backgrounds fairly.

## 3. Support schools to provide the academic preparation children need.

Most American families depend on public schools to provide children with the academic preparation necessary to join the workforce, attend college, and contribute to their communities. To date, the public education system has struggled to effectively meet these objectives for all students. Prior education reforms sought to indirectly improve students' academic outcomes by setting standards, assessing student progress towards those standards, and holding teachers and schools accountable for those results. However, trying to improve academic outcomes through these policy instruments is like trying to build a house with architectural plans but no saws, hammers, or wood—an [impossible task](#).

Closing the gap between what families and children need and what schools can currently provide starts with preparing every teacher with the knowledge and skills they need to be effective. Unfortunately, existing teacher preparation programs not only [fail to do this](#) but very often [encourage teachers](#) to use approaches that lack any

evidence of efficacy. These failures contribute mightily to the current crisis in literacy, where [three out of four teachers](#) surveyed say they use widely discredited approaches to reading instruction.

State and federal policymakers should act to address this dysfunction immediately, using their power to regulate, incentivize, and guide teacher preparation programs toward a future where every prospective teacher is prepared for the job. This means advancing professional standards for teaching that align with evidence on how children learn and using investments in teaching to support these ends. Doing this effectively will require insulating the standard-setting body from political interests that have long fought to leave the work of effective teaching unspecified. At the federal level, this can be accomplished by better leveraging the work of the Institute for Education Sciences, which already takes evidence-based positions on instructional practices through guides issued by the What Works Clearinghouse. However, given the current political turmoil at the federal level, states would be wise to invest in their own standard-setting institutions—staffed with a mix of practitioners and researchers who are mandated to use high evidentiary standards in their work.

Alongside these efforts, policymakers should address widespread weaknesses that compromise teachers' ability to be effective. Today, too few teachers have access to [high-quality curriculum materials](#), let alone [strong support](#) for understanding and implementing them. Teachers spend several hours a week sourcing materials of totally [unknown quality](#) from internet searches and sites like Pinterest and TeachersPayTeachers rather than working collaboratively to implement and adapt their core materials. Policymakers have begun to remedy these deficiencies, especially in reading instruction, but large gaps remain in both adoption and implementation support.

Even when teachers have access to high-quality curriculum and support, they face enormous challenges in implementing them, due to students' widely varying readiness for grade-level instruction. Last spring, one of us (Jochim) listened to a kindergarten teacher explain how more than half of the children in her classroom lacked the vocabulary or background knowledge the supposedly high-quality curriculum (EL Education) demanded, forcing her to search the internet for the scaffolds she believed her students needed. State policymakers should demand that curriculum producers [incorporate tools and content](#) that support the [differentiation](#) children need and teachers are expected to provide.

Teachers working alone in their classroom, however, can't possibly provide all the support that students need. Fortunately, [many adults](#) already working in schools could offer meaningful help if policymakers break down the false walls that fragment and [dilute their efforts](#). Federal and state policymakers should work to align existing investments in special education, tutoring, and community schools into a unified vision and approach that provides academic support for struggling students. They could also support efforts to test new delivery models—redesigning special education, for example, from a program that waits for children to fail before resourcing the support they need to succeed to one that responds to those needs with agility.



## What policymakers can do:

- **Create and enforce** statewide standards for teacher preparation and advanced training opportunities that align with the most current information about how children and adults learn, as well as how educators can best support multilingual learners and those with learning differences.
- **Require and support** school districts to provide all teachers with quality curriculum materials in core academic subjects. Embed ongoing support to understand and implement those materials effectively via existing authority to regulate curriculum and professional development, or through statewide systems for district support.
- **Build** statewide systems for monitoring and reporting on the key components of the instructional system, including pre-service and in-service teacher learning, curriculum adoption and use in schools, and practices for supporting students who need academic support.
- **Engage** educators as policy partners in adopting and implementing new instructional policies to build buy-in, assess feasibility, and monitor results.
- **Consolidate** existing student support programs into a single, unified system of support designed to allocate instructional resources based on student needs and meaningfully link the work of teachers, special education educators, and tutors.
- **Support** efforts to reimagine the work of teaching, how schools are organized to support student success, and the design of special education programs through targeted grant programs, regulatory flexibility, and research-practice partnerships.

## 4. Use accountability systems to benchmark results and protect against educational neglect.

The passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001 propelled a national experiment in standards-based accountability. The theory of action underlying NCLB was simple: schools would deliver better outcomes for students, especially those most marginalized, if states created clear expectations and rewarded or sanctioned schools based on their measurable results.

Proponents were at least partially correct: NCLB made clear that low-income students and students of color were underserved and catalyzed profound—and in some cases, positive—changes in public education nationwide. But NCLB failed to adequately recognize or reward schools' contributions toward closing the achievement gaps and accelerating learning. It also put too much faith in incentives and invested too little in strengthening leaders' and educators' capacity to deliver good results.

Today, accountability is out of fashion, besieged by the left, who believe that it unfairly penalizes schools that serve low-income communities of color, and the right, who believe that achievement tests fail to assess what families actually want out of schools. Both sides have a point.

However, it would be a profound mistake to conclude that public education systems do not need accountability to be effective. Our investments in public education have always reflected a shared commitment—that children, regardless of their circumstances, will gain the preparation they need to participate fully in their communities. While reasonable people may disagree about how we assess progress towards this end, abandoning our effort to do so is the same as reneging on the commitment altogether.

Unfortunately, among states that have expanded access to private education, many have already made this leap. Advocates for school choice are fond of saying that parents alone can judge whether a school is educating children effectively. But this position moves education dangerously close to a moral relativism that doesn't reflect our shared interests in children's futures or parents' real-world needs for educational solutions that prepare their children for success. It also leaves parents to navigate an increasingly complex marketplace with few market signals or protection against charlatans.

The current testing and accountability regime has largely failed to achieve its goals and has had unintended negative consequences. State assessments continue to consume valuable instructional time while delivering little in the way of instructional value. Accountability systems based on these assessments do not adequately capture the breadth of schools' educational contributions, provide clear evidence around how they might improve, or offer families the information they need to choose a school that will meet their children's needs.

Addressing these challenges isn't simple. Assessment systems must be redesigned to meet multiple goals: consume less class time, provide more useful information to educators and parents, and supply a more complete picture of school effectiveness. This means reimagining assessments according to the most fundamental principle of test design—each test should be designed to meet a single, clear purpose. The year-end summative test system we have used for 20 years is outmoded and long overdue for a refresh. We need a through-year system of assessments that is curriculum-aligned and designed to both inform instruction and help stakeholders understand students' progress towards the standards set for them.

State reporting on test results and other measures of school performance also needs an overhaul. State report cards are a [bewildering jumble](#) that no one without an advanced degree in education policy could possibly comprehend. It is long past time for states to rebuild public reporting and accountability systems according to the real needs of their users—parents and families making educational choices. And while controversial, we believe it is essential that all publicly funded schools—private, charter, and public—be measured on some common benchmarks. This will allow policymakers to fairly judge the payoff of their educational investments and parents to better navigate local education marketplaces.

States should also consider adding more holistic assessments of school effectiveness to their accountability systems. They could do this by incorporating survey-based feedback from parents and educators, which would provide a reliable mechanism for parents and policymakers to assess whether schools are delivering safe and supportive learning environments—as is expected of them. Such indicators also provide a springboard for improvement by helping stakeholders identify problems contributing to poor learning outcomes.



Accountability systems are not simply about measurement; they are essential to protecting families from educational neglect and must include remedies for children whose schools are not working for them. Intervening in local schools has never been a popular idea. But we should not abandon state interventions (e.g., closures, takeovers, creation of new school options) because they were poorly used and received in the past. Local school systems sometimes get stuck—dysfunction and toxic political realities fuel a negative spiral that is difficult to overcome. States have key roles to play in getting them unstuck. This can include reimagining state support structures to be more effective, but should not exclude more authoritative interventions in cases where no feasible amount of support is sufficient. The success or failure of any state intervention depends less on the power state leaders wield and more on whether they restore communities' trust and confidence in local schools.

### What policymakers can do:

- **Abandon** measures that fail to validly capture school effectiveness (e.g., status-based measures of school performance); interventions that aren't working to improve schools (e.g., school closures in contexts where there are no reasonable alternatives available); and testing regimes that waste time without providing the information that stakeholders need (e.g., assessment systems that don't provide rapid, actionable feedback).
- **Develop** assessment systems that provide both (1) timely information about children's mastery of essential knowledge and skills to inform instruction and intervention, and (2) summative evaluation of students' progress toward grade-level standards.
- **Build** public report card systems that actually make sense and answer real questions that parents and other stakeholders have about school performance.
- **Require** common benchmarks for all publicly-funded schools—district, charter, or private—that reflect the essential knowledge and skills families, taxpayers, and policymakers expect schools to provide.
- **Explore** strategies for incorporating parent and educator feedback into accountability systems.

### Reality check: Education reform can only succeed with teacher support

Any effort to improve public education hinges on the support of educators who work on the front lines of translating our ambitions into real-world results. Securing educator support is especially salient in the wake of [low morale](#), high rates of turnover, and [critical shortages](#) in rural areas, STEM fields, and special education.

The policy agenda we've outlined addresses these challenges by making teaching more attractive and ensuring public schools are places where teachers want to work. Like all of us, teachers want to succeed at their jobs, enjoy the support of their colleagues,

and access opportunities for professional growth. Policymakers and administrators who support orderly classrooms, ensure access to high-quality curriculum, and deploy meaningful assessment and student support systems aren't just improving students' opportunities to learn—they're improving teachers' opportunities to succeed in their jobs. Because our agenda addresses some of the biggest headaches teachers face, we believe teachers' unions could find common cause in operationalizing the ideas we suggest, especially if policymakers engage teachers along the way as part of their efforts.

## Implementing a problem-focused agenda

Most American children will spend 13 years of their lives attending public schools—profoundly shaping families' well-being, the health of communities, and the broader economy for all of us, parents and non-parents alike. Because public education affects so many, it has always enjoyed broad support, bridging divides between Republicans and Democrats, business leaders and workers, parents and non-parents.

It is easy to lose sight of our shared interests in a political environment oriented toward stoking outrage. But policymakers could rally that support again if they were to advance real solutions to the challenges in public education.

Schools are crying out for a robust policy agenda that takes lessons from prior efforts, aligns with what we know about how to improve schools, and keeps partisan controversies out of the classroom. Parents are clear—they want schools that keep children safe, prepare them for the workforce, contribute to their communities, are staffed by caring and happy teachers, and steer clear of left- or right-wing politics. Leaders in the White House, Congress, governors' mansions, and state legislatures will have to deal with these issues in the coming years. The future of education is the future of America. Wherever children are being educated—at home, in private schools, or in our nation's 13,000 public school districts—we need to do everything we can to ensure they have the resources and support they need to succeed.

## About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

The [Center on Reinventing Public Education](#) (CRPE) is a nonpartisan research organization at [Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College](#). We rigorously examine and test transformative ideas, using our research to inform action. We are truth tellers who combine forward-thinking ideas with empirical rigor. Since 1993, we have been untethered to any one ideology but unwavering in a core belief: 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 work to inform meaningful changes in policy and practice that will drive the public education system to meet the needs of every student.

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