



UNLOCKING THE FUTURE

Toward a new reform agenda
for K–12 education

FEBRUARY 2023



UNLOCKING THE FUTURE

Toward a new reform agenda
for K-12 education

FEBRUARY 2023

ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION

Opportunity America is a Washington-based nonprofit promoting economic mobility—work, skills, careers, ownership and entrepreneurship for poor and working Americans. The organization’s principal activities are research, policy development, dissemination of policy ideas and working to build consensus around policy proposals.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Members of the Opportunity America working group on K–12 education gave generously of their time and insight to produce this collection. The meetings were contentious from the get-go. Participants from across the political spectrum brought diverse viewpoints and strong opinions. But we persisted, and disagreements gradually gave way to constructive discussion. Members gave presentations, crafted outlines, wrote essays and worked tirelessly to revise them. We’re grateful to a handful of external speakers—Brown University economist John Friedman, Harvard Graduate School of Education professor Thomas Kane, former US Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings and Education Trust founder and former CEO Kati Haycock—who informed our discussions with thoughtful presentations. Special gratitude goes to our funder, the Walton Family Foundation, which conceived of the project and challenged us to overcome our differences for the sake of today’s K–12 students and generations to come.

The views expressed in the pages that follow are those of members of the working group, not the institutions with which they are affiliated.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: Will crisis beget opportunity?	1
by Tamar Jacoby	
What the pandemic taught us: Direct funding for families	5
by Derrell Bradford	
New frames for new constituencies	11
by Robin Lake	
Closing the global achievement gap	17
by Will Marshall	
Distance to 100: An alternative to racial achievement gaps	23
by Ian Rowe	
Rethinking accountability	29
by John Bailey	
School choice as accountability	35
by Andy Rotherham	
Parents and educators need a bold new approach to collaborating	43
by Keri Rodrigues	
The future depends on students and families	47
by Denise Forte	
A new definition of student success	53
by Frances Messano	
'The army we have': Asking teachers to do fewer things better	59
by Robert Pondiscio and Jessica Schurz	
Anchoring K–12 education in 21st-century foundational skills	65
by Matt Sigelman	
Career pathways' American moment	71
by Paul Herdman	
Essay authors	77

INTRODUCTION

WILL CRISIS BEGET OPPORTUNITY?

Tamar Jacoby

People grow accustomed to even the loudest alarms—after a while, you just don't hear them, or you learn to shrug them off, usually at your own peril. So it is with the state of American K–12 education. We've been hearing for so long that our schools are in crisis that many people just shrug and move on when they hear the warnings. What will it take for us to see the trouble we're in? Don't we grasp that it's our children who are paying the price—our children and the nation's future?

The crisis

The crisis we face today has three dimensions. It starts with Covid-19 learning loss. The disruptions of the pandemic years were a huge setback: students are way behind where they should be in reading and math, with no clear prospect of catching up any time soon. Second, parents are angry and clamoring for change. Yet it's not clear that their calls are being heard or acted upon. Third, on education as in many other areas of American life, there is no political consensus—no agreement about what would help and no effective left-right coalition in place to drive reform.

Most parents don't need a test to tell them how far their kids fell behind during the pandemic. But the test results reported in October

Most parents don't need a test to tell them how far their kids fell behind during the pandemic.

2022 by the US Department of Education were deeply disconcerting. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) revealed that fourth graders' math scores had dropped by five points since the last time the test was administered, before the pandemic, in 2019. Eighth-grade math scores were even more disappointing—down eight points since 2019. Both were the largest declines ever recorded on the biennial NAEP test. In reading, both fourth- and eighth-grade scores fell by three points.

Also troubling, although scores were slightly better in some states than in others, there were few significant discrepancies. Contentious as many state lawmakers' decisions may have seemed at the time—whether and when to close schools, whether to require masks, when to return to the classroom—nothing policymakers did during the pandemic appears to have made much difference. Math scores dropped or

remained flat in every state, with no statistically significant gains for either fourth or eighth graders. According to the “Nation’s Report Card,” as the NAEP tests are often called, pandemic-era learning loss has been dramatic and all but universal.

Not surprisingly, parents are angry and standing up to say so at every opportunity. Their frustration surfaced first in Virginia in 2021, when political neophyte Glenn Youngkin captured the governor’s seat with the campaign slogan “Parents matter,” promising families a more robust say about what happens in their children’s schools. Education was a somewhat less salient issue in the 2022 midterm elections—soaring inflation and the threat of imminent recession concentrated voters’ minds on other things.

Yet several recent polls suggest that schools were a strong second-tier priority in 2022. According to one sounding by a bipartisan team from Public Opinion Strategies (POS) and Impact Research, 72 percent of midterm voters rated K–12 education a “very important” issue—not far behind the 76 percent who said the same of “the economy and job situation.”

Perhaps even more alarming, the more time passes since the peak of the pandemic, the more concerned parents appear to grow. In March 2022, 29 percent of respondents told the Winston Group that they thought their kids were “significantly behind where they would have been” if there had been no Covid-19. Nine months later, even as the pandemic faded into memory for many people, parental concern had intensified: 36 percent said their kids were “significantly behind.”

What we don’t know: had the learning loss revealed itself more sharply with time—or, perhaps worse, were parents beginning to despair that the damage could never be undone?

This parental concern could potentially be a good thing—just the catalyst we need to overcome the inertia of the past and produce meaningful change in the nation’s schools. Nearly three-quarters of respondents told the POS-Impact polling team that they were “more

Some essays are deeply personal, reflecting the authors’ frustration and anger at the status quo.

concerned now about what is happening in public schools” than they had been before the pandemic. Nearly half—46 percent, up from just 36 percent the year before—said they wanted “bold change” in K–12 education. And nearly two-thirds—64 percent—said “parents should have more control than they do” over what children are being taught in school.

The challenge: when pollsters probe deeper, they often find parents concerned about so many things that it’s hard to craft a cohesive remedy. For some voters, the top issues are school lockdowns and poor test scores. Others are more worried about woke curriculum and what they see as self-serving teachers’ unions. Still others want better school technology, more school security, enhanced mental health services or more career-focused education—to name just a few of the items that received top scores on one recent public poll.

Right and left are rarely on the same page. One faction’s idea of progress is all but sure to be poison to other parents. No wonder many elected officials are ducking the issue. Urgent and important as it is, there is no clear road map for reform.

This isn’t a new problem. The last time right and left came together wholeheartedly around K–12 education was in January 2002, when conservative Republican President George W. Bush and liberal Democratic Senator Edward Kennedy traveled together to an elementary school in Hamilton, Ohio, to sign the landmark No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. The idea at the heart of their compromise: that academic standards and accountability, concepts favored by many on the right, could produce more educational

equity, a favorite goal of the left. Annual testing with results disaggregated by race and ethnicity could be used to hold educators accountable and improve results for all students, black and white, rich and poor, urban and rural.

The idea attracted broad support—a robust bipartisan coalition that included not just lawmakers but also business leaders, civil rights groups, educators, advocates, funders and a wide array of for-profit and nonprofit education organizations. All cheered when the new approach appeared to get off to a good start. Test scores improved in the early years, particularly for students of color, and the gap between black and white children narrowed.

But it didn't take long for cracks to appear. Teachers disliked the testing requirements. They argued that test preparation took time away from essential classroom learning and persuaded many parents to stand with them in opposition to NCLB mandates. Conservatives chafed at the federal oversight, arguing for more local control. In 2014, the nation's schools missed the legislation's all-important long-term deadline—that by 2014, all students, black and white, would be “proficient” for their age in both reading and math. And as time went on, many on the left and right cheered the death of the NCLB coalition—by then, the nation's polarized politics left little room for bipartisanship.

An opportunity

The Walton Family Foundation (WFF) was among those who felt differently. One of the nation's leading education funders, WFF had supported groups across the spectrum of the 2002 left-right coalition. As the years went by, Walton program officers were increasingly dismayed by the growing divisions and discord among these grantees. And in early 2020, the foundation decided to do something about the fragmentation of the field: not to double down on No Child Left Behind—there was no question of that nearly two decades later. Instead, the foundation recruited a working group of

education advocates and tasked them with exploring the possibility of rallying around a new reform consensus.

Could left and right agree on what's wrong with K–12 education? Could they come together to endorse a new set of shared goals? Most ambitiously, could they agree on a reform agenda and sign their names to it—a first step, perhaps, toward enacting a new bipartisan approach to improving the nation's schools?

The 12 authors in this volume and a few other education thinkers who eventually dropped out of the working group met for the first time in February 2021 to explore the issues and work through their differences. Participants came from across the political spectrum and the education sector: right and left, practitioners and researchers, incrementalists and impatient advocates.

It became clear early on that we probably could not agree on a detailed reform agenda. It would take time for that—more time than we had. But we committed to talk through the issues and search for common ground, and we gathered—mostly by Zoom, it turned out—for seven intense half-day meetings over the next 10 months.

The essays in this collection are the product of those meetings. Individual authors bear sole responsibility for their essays, and many of the proposals put forward here were deeply controversial among other members of the group. But all the ideas in the pages that follow came up for discussion in our meetings, and all were tempered—and, I believe, improved—by the group's tough-minded, bipartisan scrutiny.

The essays vary widely. Some are deeply personal, reflecting not just the authors' hopes—their deep commitment to effective K–12 education—but also their frustration and anger at the status quo in American schools. Other essays are data-driven, clinical and analytic. Many authors draw on decades of experience in the field, whether as researchers, policy thinkers or practitioners working on the ground in schools and communities.

There is more agreement across the volume

than one might have expected from the spirited conversations at our Zoom meetings—more than a few common threads and parallel proposals. Among the themes that echo from essay to essay: more parental input, new approaches to accountability, new thinking about the role of teachers and other adults from the community, new emphasis on career education.

We're still a long way from the consensus of 2002—this collection is not a manifesto. But it's a place to start for advocates and educators of

goodwill looking to engage in a conversation that can lead to consensual K–12 reform.

Our group knows firsthand: coming to consensus will not be easy. Yet there can be little doubt—the nation needs it. *Dire* is a big word, but the status quo is approaching dire. It's time for parents, policymakers, educators and community leaders to come together and find a better way—for the sake of our children and our future.

WHAT THE PANDEMIC TAUGHT US: DIRECT FUNDING FOR FAMILIES

Derrell Bradford

The past 20 years have been a fertile time for education reform—many ideas, many initiatives. But one idea that has not been fully realized is a market for educational opportunity driven by parental demand. There has been a lot of talk about parents, most of it about giving parents choices among schools and access to seats in different schools. But that is not enough.

What's needed is a true education marketplace, with direct funding to families as its foundational element. Without a marketplace of this kind, there will never be real reform. It's essential if we hope to create the education system of the future.

A long, strange trip

In April 2002, I got on a plane to Milwaukee, Wisconsin. I had just taken a job working for a New Jersey advocacy group promoting school choice, and we were taking a group of New Jersey community leaders and elected officials to see the private school choice program in Milwaukee in the hope that they would return home supporting the creation of something similar in their cities.

I'd never been to Milwaukee, but the idea of school choice made sense to me. I had a cousin who went to a magnet school in Baltimore. I myself had gone to high school on a scholarship,

Covid exposed long-standing, fundamental inequities and inefficacies.

and it had changed my life for the better. At the end of the trip, I was convinced. How hard could this be?

It's been more than 20 years since that trip. Many parts of the education landscape, in New Jersey and America, have changed for the better. More states fund charter schools than in 2002. The country's first Black president supported school choice. School districts like New York City and Washington, DC, have experimented with mayoral control of education. A movement to identify and close racial education achievement gaps held policymakers' attention for more than a decade. Parental choice moved from the edges to the center of the political lexicon. This was all positive.

Despite these successes, it's also true that many of the assumptions that drove the choice and reform movements have proved unworkable. Many advocates believed that data-driven performance management could be used to encourage effective teaching, raising the level of the profession in a way that would be popular

We need a true marketplace where families can express their preferences to shape the schools their children attend.

among both teachers and families. That effort now sits broken on a beach of bad studies and technocracy.

Others, myself among them, hoped that the stellar track record of many charter schools would speak for itself—that the movement’s success in closing the achievement gap would generate political support for a wholesale expansion of school choice. Instead, we have been disappointed by charter caps and the slowing pace of charter school growth. The movement has been blessed with strong leaders and effective advocates, but the inertia of low expectations and teachers unions’ influence has outlasted even the most talented and visionary managers in many school districts.

Political leaders have also disappointed us. Many Democrats fail to see how choice can benefit their core constituencies; they remain tepid on charters and broadly opposed to private school choice. Many Republicans speak the language of educational opportunity, but they give school choice lip service while strangling it on the statehouse floor. In all, there has been improvement here and there—a few bright lights—but nothing like the wholesale change many of us hoped for.

Even so, the reform movement might have been able to claim success if the pandemic had not created a host of new challenges. As many have recognized, Covid-19 exposed long-standing, fundamental inequities and inefficiencies hardwired into many of the systems that undergird the American experiment. Nowhere was this more evident than in how the nation’s public schools handled the pandemic.

Children had to make do with poorly implemented virtual learning. Parents watching over their children’s shoulders in virtual classrooms were shaken by the dismal quality of instruction. In some states, policymakers unilaterally removed virtual options. Yet families that sought to return to in-person schooling were met with strikes, closed buildings and educator protests featuring coffins and scythes.

Women dropped out of the workforce to take charge of their families’ childcare. Childhood obesity, suicide and anxiety grew along with what we now know is disastrous learning loss. Unions championed teachers’ concerns as if they were the only thing that mattered, pushing the needs of parents and children to the fringes. Statewide assessments were imperiled, and with them, the record of the harm done to the nation’s children. What began as an earnest attempt to stop the spread of Covid turned into what can only be described as “hostage taking,” with states trading open schools for billions of dollars in federal aid.

In the wake of the pandemic, with its stresses and failures in full public view, the nation’s K–12 public schools are on the edge of a dangerous loss of public trust and confidence.

Millions of American families now wake up and wonder about the school day ahead: will it be in person or online, a whole day or a half day, with the child’s regular teacher or a substitute? Policymakers have promoted this uncertainty and raised fundamental questions about our norms for public education, as many states seem to ignore their constitutional commitment to provide compulsory education for all children. The old debates about school quality seem almost quaint—if only we were still arguing about how to advance school quality—and it feels almost impossible to resume that essential quest as part of a broader strategy for change.

The system is buckling under its own weight, strangled by its own politics. It cannot meet the challenges of the K–12 students who have missed reading windows or the high school students who have disappeared from state

enrollment data. It has no answer for the emotional stagnation of millions of learners of all ages.

Something different must be done. Something new and dynamic must be unleashed—not simply to meet the challenges of today but to produce the education system of the future.

A new set of assumptions

Improving outcomes and opportunities for students of color has been a North Star for educational reformers for many decades, and rightly so, as the Black-white achievement gap drove education policy in districts across the land. But this rationale is showing its age—it no longer works as the unifying force it once was.

We see this in the disconnect between families of color and Democrats on school choice issues, with African American and Hispanic parents strongly supportive and their traditional allies indifferent at best. Meanwhile, white suburban parents have rebelled against testing and scuttled teacher evaluations, and the anti-charter “SOS” groups have blocked much of the education reform movement’s core agenda. These doubters’ concerns must be reckoned with.

The future requires a revisiting of our old assumptions and two fundamental changes in approach. Instead of narrow strategies that focus on only the least well-served students in the name of equity, we must broaden the constituency that supports reform. And instead of concentrating our efforts on one education sector—charters or portfolio districts—we must reorient policy toward collaboration and universality.

Many suburbanites and white progressives fail to appreciate the role choice plays in closing the achievement gap for low-income kids of color. But we can’t reinvent the system without these groups. We need a strategy that includes them and draws on their support.

This will require marrying urban and suburban constituencies to create a more diverse base of support across ethnicity, income and geography.

More profoundly, it will require collaboration among different kinds of education providers, including private schools, charter schools, homeschooling families, learning cooperatives and pandemic-era startups such as pods and microschoools. Only a coalition this diverse will be taken seriously by policymakers and able to protect itself as political conditions change.

This new coalition will need a new agenda, and it should be based on education funding channeled through families rather than school districts.

Direct funding for families

Channeling education funding through school districts is a time-honored tradition in America, but today it is reinforcing everything that’s wrong with the status quo—all the questionable institutional arrangements, dubious incentives and vulnerabilities of the current system.

We won’t see the change we need without different incentives, and the best way to advance that is with an education marketplace driven by parents’ needs and demands. We must rethink how we finance education with that goal in mind.

The reformers of the past few decades aren’t wrong: dollars should follow students and be weighted by students’ needs. But that alone will not create the conditions for the education system of the future to emerge.

What we need is a true marketplace where families can express their preferences to shape the schools their children attend. Funding should be channeled directly to families—that’s the only way to give parents enough influence to drive meaningful change on the ground.

Parents must be able to decide how education dollars flow. They must be able to get around district leadership they no longer trust. A system built on direct funding will position families to break down the silos that now separate different types of schools—public, private and others.

It can also be a socioeconomic equalizer, giving all parents the power to demand the

bundling of educational opportunities that, for the most part, only affluent children now enjoy—for example, schools working with non-profits, museums, apprenticeship programs and other providers of extracurricular learning. Indeed, funding funneled to parents may be the only way to combat the inherent inequality of a district-driven approach—a universe in which the education children receive is primarily determined by where they live.

School districts have a lot of work to do to restore the trust they squandered during the pandemic—and over time, perhaps they will. But families need an alternative in the meantime. They need to be empowered to shape their children’s education directly with public funding.

But putting money in parents’ hands is only a first step. It should go hand in hand with three other reforms to help families make the most of their new leverage.

Build on the best of the pandemic. Nothing can make up for the tragic loss of life from Covid-19, but the pandemic had a silver lining for K–12 education. Children’s urgent educational needs and parental anxieties drove a willingness to experiment with change not seen since President Barack Obama’s Race to the Top.

Learning pods, microschoools, an explosion of tutoring and community learning efforts, boundary-breaking virtual offerings and a quantum leap in homeschooling gave new meaning to the phrase “school choice” and drove choice legislation in nearly 30 states. With K–12 public schools largely closed or delivering poorly implemented virtual instruction, families had to find another way, and their creativity knew no bounds. We must preserve this bias toward the new and prevent a retreat toward the sclerosis of the pre-pandemic years.

Create a market with new types of measurement. Every parent has a fundamental right to know how their child is doing in school, and for decades, our education system has measured

Something new must be done to ensure parents’ right to know.

progress with annual assessments given to all children. These tests can provide data to help educators intervene to support struggling students. But it’s difficult to argue that they are the best or easiest way to measure student learning, especially in a world where all children are different, with different dreams, talents and aspirations.

During the Obama years, many of the nation’s largest school districts tried to supplement these tests with performance-driven teacher evaluations, provoking a backlash that is still with us—resistance that has compromised the use of any assessments to provide the information parents need about the school systems in their communities.

Today, as the pandemic recedes, polling shows that parents are eager to know where their children stand after many years of disrupted learning. But annual assessments remain controversial, with parents and policymakers alike uncertain how best to measure schools and student performance. We need something different. Something new must be done to ensure that parents’ right to know is protected into the future.

One place to start is with the experimentation that emerged in the pandemic. Even as annual assessments were waived and some school districts led a race to the bottom by giving all children A’s, parents found ways to collect data from web-based applications and online platforms. Let’s build on that experimentation to create a marketplace based on performance and measurement—a marketplace organized by parents rather than policymakers and financed by families using funds that flow directly to them under a new approach to school financing.

We have only begun to imagine the possibilities. Whether a diagnostic by a local tutor, a learning portal that identifies gaps in what a student knows or a future innovation modeled on health fitness apps, there are many ways to deliver personal data in a timely and confidential manner. Annual assessments have a role to play in how state and district policymakers target resources and interventions, particularly for historically underserved students. But families deserve more, and there are many tools to choose among.

Eliminate boundaries. Pandemic-era innovation can also help us sever the age-old, pernicious link between residential segregation and schooling.

By definition, the neighborhood public school is rooted in a particular place, and for most of American history, place has been inextricably linked to race—racial exclusion and inequality.

The story starts with the corrosive history of redlining, the New Deal-era policy that prohibited banks from offering mortgages to African Americans in neighborhoods labeled “hazardous.” The next step was residential assignment in schools. A 1935 Federal Housing Administration underwriters manual laid out the toxic rationale: “If a neighborhood is to retain stability, it is necessary that properties shall continue to be occupied by the same social and racial classes. A change in social or racial occupancy generally leads to instability and a reduction in values.”

School financing based on property taxes reinforces this poisonous legacy and penalizes Black homeowners, as houses in heavily African American neighborhoods appreciate more slowly than elsewhere. Not only are families sequestered based on where they live, but they find themselves less able to fund their own schools.

This ossified link between education and place is what drives police officers to follow children home from school to confirm whether they live in the districts where they attend school. It puts parents in jail for trying to do what is right

for their children and bids up housing prices for young families across America. We can and must do better.

There are many models to build on: education not bound by place offered at independent and charter schools, magnet schools that draw children with similar interests from across their cities and now, in the wake of the pandemic, pods, community tutoring and hybrid homeschooling.

A new approach to school financing that puts money in parents’ hands can help families make the best of this abundance, and a new approach to measurement will provide the tools to help them choose the options that are best for their kids.

Next steps

Funding channeled directly to families isn’t a utopian dream. Many states are already experimenting with policies that put money in parents’ hands. Idaho’s “Strong Families, Strong Students” initiative sent \$50 million in grants to families. Kansas followed suit with bipartisan legislation also granting \$50 million directly to parents. Ohio and Nebraska have passed similar programs, while West Virginia and Arizona are experimenting with education savings accounts that prioritize children’s aspirations above where they live. Far from being a fringe policy, direct funding for families is moving to the center of the political agenda.

The education system of the future cannot be known—it’s up to us to build it. But the pandemic—both its egregious failures and the innovation it sparked—has taught us many lessons. Direct funding for families would provide a foundation to build on. Our kids and our nation deserve better, and the time to embrace the future is now.

Funding channeled directly to families isn’t a utopian dream.

NEW FRAMES FOR NEW CONSTITUENCIES

Robin Lake

Anyone who cares about kids must rejoice that they are back in school with their peers after three years disrupted by school closures and other pandemic-related challenges. But that should not blind us to the harsh truths we have learned about our public education system—how badly it responded to the pandemic and how, as always, it served those with loud voices and political power and left those who were already struggling even further behind.

What happened during the past three years was entirely predictable. A rigid system designed for the status quo cracked under the pressure of a crisis. Despite the work of many well-meaning people, schools and school systems were largely unable to meet students' needs.

Many were horrified to witness how slowly and badly many school districts pivoted to remote learning and how few adopted innovation or even well-known evidence-based interventions. Those of us who have been fighting for shifts in 21st-century teaching and learning gave each other a resigned shrug. Sadly, families with low incomes, “complex learners” with developmental issues and children with disabilities were not surprised. But millions of suburban families were shocked to see union politics and outdated management systems impede even basic services and individualized student supports.

A rigid system designed for the status quo cracked under the pressure of a crisis.

It has become cliché to say that the pandemic exposed and exacerbated inequality, so let's be more specific. Let's not kid ourselves into thinking these inequalities were accidental when they were squarely by design.

American public schools are hardwired for inequality. Union policies and the way we fund schools ensure that students who most need the best and most effective teaching do not receive it. A lack of incentives to be responsive to student and family needs, combined with a lack of effective accountability for improved outcomes, means that schools resist rather than embrace individualization, adaptation and innovation.

No, what happened should not surprise us. It should, in fact, deepen our resolve for changes that education reformers have been fighting to achieve for decades: an education system driven by evidence and results instead of politics, a focus on student interests over institutional interests and better choices and options for all students.

As we look around at the still-unfolding aftermath of the pandemic, the evidence is clear:

students need help now. Students missed many months of instruction and suffered socially and emotionally. We must pay them back what they are owed, and we must find a way to build a more equitable, nimble and responsive American education system.

Now more than ever, we need deep, lasting reforms. And those opposed to change must be called out for standing in the way of what students need.

The old reform coalition is dead

The education reform movement, once robustly bipartisan, was already faltering before the pandemic. Old coalitions were flailing due in part to their own missteps and in part to a fierce backlash from many parents. Differences between liberals and conservatives previously seen as tolerable became divisive litmus tests.

When I first began studying the charter school movement, I was fascinated by who attended meetings. There were progressive educators wearing Nehru collars and berets who wanted to start their dream schools free from school district bureaucracies. There were old civil rights leaders who saw poor and minority students trapped in failing schools as a social justice issue. One such zealot had conference attendees join hands and sing, "We shall overcome."

There were Black and brown civic leaders from the Urban League and the National Council of La Raza who believed the kids in their communities were drowning in a sea of low expectations. There were business leaders in suits who believed in setting high standards and giving school leaders more flexibility and freedom from union constraints. There were conservatives and libertarians who believed in the power of choice and markets to empower parents and instill competition.

There were technocratic state and district leaders who believed government should focus on "steering not rowing" to achieve better outcomes. There were politicians from the right and left who were prepping candidates

What seemed like an unstoppable push for improvement came to a grinding halt.

with bipartisan-sounding talking points. And there were parents, frustrated and desperate for options. A set of stranger bedfellows I have never seen.

Despite some mistrust and suspicion, there was a strong comradeship. People may have come to meetings for different reasons, but there was a clear common cause and a pride in the knowledge that people could work together across deep divisions. Advocates for state standards, accountability and teacher quality allied with charter advocates, viewing their reform agendas as generally complementary. Laws were passed, often with close bipartisan votes. Schools were created, and new opportunities for students emerged.

But over two decades, what seemed like an unstoppable push for improvement came to a grinding halt. Success brought the wrath of a better-funded, better-organized opposition. Bipartisanship went out of fashion with the rise of a more deeply divided nation. And the reform community overreached, sustaining unnecessary, self-inflicted wounds. Communities felt reforms were foisted on them and out of sync with their values and their children's overall welfare, and many rejected an approach that seemed to prize high test scores above their children's future.

Today, people with varying views of the road to reform need professional facilitators and team-building activities to find common cause. Pragmatic cooperation has been replaced by a profound and crippling mistrust.

But here is the rub: the pandemic proved how much we need reform focused on choice, accountability and teacher quality. Yet the education reform coalition is dead, or on life support. So where do we go from here?

New frames, new constituencies

It is time for a new, broader reform coalition made up of all those—doctors, mental health providers, church leaders, afterschool providers, community activists, suburban parents, parents of students with disabilities and business leaders—who saw things in the American education system during the pandemic that they cannot unsee. Advocates for children must lead the way by uniting despite our differences.

But this new coalition will not come together over tired or politically divisive ideas. Sure, after the failures of the past three years, the old hallmarks of reform—school autonomy, choice, high expectations, quality instruction and accountability for results—should have resonance with families and community leaders. But the pandemic exposed an uncomfortable truth about education reform: the ideas that were supposed to lead to a more innovative and resilient system also largely failed to meet the moment.

With Covid-19 driving school closures and parents scrambling to find other solutions, state assessment and accountability systems seemed outdated, rigid and out of sync with family and educator needs. Charter schools struggled with teacher attrition and could not support student well-being. Funding designed to follow students to schools prevented many families from paying for tutoring or online courses when they needed them. The “college for all” mantra rang hollow as students stared down a need to get jobs to support their families.

The pandemic revealed that families and communities want more from schools than education reformers have delivered, including support for student well-being, affirmation of their identities, joyful learning environments and authentic relationships with adults. Delivering these things could help reformers forge new alliances.

Forming a coalition as powerful and pragmatic as the now-defunct education reform movement will require reformers to let go of the past. It’s time for new ideas and new frames.

Choice, accountability and teacher quality will be as essential as ever, but we’ll need to see them in new light.

Let’s give up on the notion of repairing a deeply fractured coalition and build around a new vision for the future that once again resonates with beret-wearing educators, social justice warriors, parent-empowerment advocates and stuffy business leaders.

Reformers’ core tenets—choice, accountability and teacher quality—will be as essential as ever in the post-pandemic era, but we’ll need to see them in new light as we respond to a changing world. A compelling new agenda must recognize the imperative for a more customized, agile public education system. And it must appeal to what families and educators truly want and need.

The pandemic years highlighted six core needs popular with families and educators and worth fighting for.

Highly individualized school designs. Kids have always had widely varying talents and academic competencies. But the educational response to the pandemic exacerbated these differences and revealed how badly designed most schools are to meet diverse student needs.

Why can’t schools be more customized, focused on early intervention and designed to cultivate students’ individual interests and talents? Schools should do what is required to serve the extremes, not the mean, capturing talents that are now being lost and motivating students who are settling for mediocrity. This might mean that some schools’ primary role would be to curate services and supports rather than trying to provide everything to every student.

A reimagined teacher workforce. Diverse needs demand diverse solutions. Schooling can no longer take a one-size-fits-all approach—and moving toward more flexibility will require widespread innovation and adaptation.

Technological tools have a role to play, but the most important solution is an old-fashioned one: stronger relationships between adults and students. Classes based on a ratio of one teacher for every 30 students no longer work. The future demands more creative staffing and school models that are more effective for both adults and students.

We need a wider variety of teachers. Some will invariably be specialists who are experts at teaching specific bodies of knowledge. But others should focus on building relationships with students and curating customized learning packages. A broader conception of the teaching profession could also encompass community educators of the kind that emerged during the pandemic to tutor and mentor students.

Reforms of this kind can improve teacher satisfaction and create more opportunities for individualized instruction. Surely, this is something around which Republicans and Democrats can come together.

Happier learning environments. Many students' and teachers' emotional and mental health suffered during the pandemic. But this wasn't new. The pandemic simply revealed how badly equipped schools are to address those needs and how schools indeed often exacerbate them.

Left to their own devices while schools remained closed, parents and educators formed pods and microschools. They homeschooled their children and used online tools in creative ways. They let antsy young children run around when they needed to and allowed older students more control over their learning and schedules, crafting instruction to meet each student's particular needs.

Families of color reported that their children excelled academically and grew in confidence

when they were taught in racially affirming environments. Teachers reported higher levels of satisfaction. Parents reported that their students were more likely to feel known, heard and valued and were more engaged in learning.

Career-relevant learning. The world of work and the global economy are changing. The future demands more problem solvers, creative thinkers and people who know how to collaborate. But our schools are ill-equipped to help students develop these strengths.

During the pandemic, high school students made clear that they found school boring and irrelevant without other kids or extracurricular activities. Many who dropped out in the past three years now say they are increasingly dubious about the value of high school and even college.

There is an urgent need to reshape high school to better prepare students for careers, including with apprenticeship programs and instruction leading to alternative credentials. Schools can start by forming creative partnerships with higher education and industry to help students develop their passions and realize their dreams.

Reforms of this kind will require new thinking about accountability and graduation requirements. Schools for younger students should focus more closely on a limited set of core requirements, perhaps just developmental skills directly linked to readiness for secondary education. Older students should be able to build personalized learning pathways, earning competency-based credits that count toward high school graduation, college coursework and industry credentials.

Families and communities as true partners. The pandemic forced families and communities across the country to experiment with learning environments. When kids were learning from their living rooms, schools had no choice but to treat parents as full partners in the learning process. Some parents took matters into their own

hands, forming learning pods in which teachers reported more flexibility to tailor learning experiences to student needs. Community organizations such as afterschool providers also formed pods, bringing a new and more diverse group of educators to the fore.

Parents and community leaders sometimes found they were more effective in the classroom than the child's regular teacher. And students of color formed new connections with caring adults who looked like them and shared their life experiences. These parents and children are unlikely to want to relinquish the magic they uncovered amid the gloom of the pandemic.

It's time to reimagine parent information systems, design schools that leverage community expertise and empower families to meet students' needs when their neighborhood schools fall short. It's time to ask schools to work more closely with others in their communities, including businesses, hospitals and clinics, social service organizations, cultural institutions and colleges.

Equity gaps must be prioritized, not swept under the rug. Community "navigators" and community organizations are well positioned to help. But proposed solutions must be evaluated by diverse points of view and operated by local communities.

A more agile and resilient public education system. Families, local businesses and civic leaders have seen firsthand that the institutions charged with educating children are in crisis. K–12 leaders already know this. Students' academic challenges, teacher shortages and morale problems, classroom behavior issues and raucous board meetings are causing more and more superintendents to consider quitting.

And things will only get tougher from here. A painful fiscal reckoning looms, as declining student enrollment threatens to exacerbate the end of supplemental pandemic-era education funding.

Agility and responsiveness will not emerge out of nowhere. We need more relaxed state

requirements, more philanthropic investment in innovative staffing and instructional models and allowances to revisit burdensome labor agreements when necessary. We also need better crisis management to prepare for natural disasters, future pandemics and other disruptions.

Funding should increase. It should be more flexible and follow students for longer. A student who graduates early should be able to use saved funds to come back to school for additional learning later in life. A student who develops a passion for dance should be able to pay for specialized dance classes by forgoing another elective. Government can play a critical role, providing oversight, informing parents and protecting students. But it doesn't always need to be the main provider of services.

Getting from here to there

Moving toward a bold vision for the future of learning will take a commitment to innovation, policy change and focused advocacy. The education reform movement must admit mistakes and let go of old ways. We need a new coalition with fresh ideas that is also clear-eyed about what it will take to bring about the change it proposes. We all must be willing to learn the lessons of the past, and we must commit to engaging with people who have disparate points of view in service of a common goal.

If we care about preparing every student for a life of informed citizenship and economic independence, we cannot afford infighting and petty squabbles. Supporters from all corners must come together to ensure society does not squander the talents of a generation.

CLOSING THE GLOBAL ACHIEVEMENT GAP

Will Marshall

For decades, US education reformers have struggled to narrow stubborn achievement gaps among White, Black and Hispanic students. With China driving hard to overtake America as the world's largest and most dynamic economy, our country's leaders should show a greater sense of urgency in closing another kind of achievement gap: the underwhelming performance of US students compared to their peers abroad.

As President Joe Biden often observes, the United States is locked in a "strategic competition" with China for economic and technological leadership in the 21st century. The United States won't win this contest by continuing to tolerate mediocre public schools for the middle class and low-performing schools for low-income Americans.

China sees itself as the rising power in the world and the United States as a decadent and spent historical force. Under its ultranationalistic president, Xi Jinping, China is keen to demonstrate to developing countries the supposed superiority of its state-directed model for economic growth over the "chaos" of Western capitalism. Beijing also draws invidious comparisons between the "social harmony" enforced in increasingly totalitarian fashion by the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and an America riven by internal political and racial strife.

In short, the rivalry between the United States and China isn't simply commercial; it's a contest

The rivalry between the United States and China isn't simply commercial.

of political beliefs and governing systems—liberal democracy versus Beijing's new hybrid of markets and autocracy. At issue isn't only which country will achieve the highest living standards and per capita wealth but also which will set global standards on trade, economic competition, climate change and human rights.

On the innovation front, the CCP has made no secret of its determination to mobilize state resources to help Chinese companies dominate the high-tech industries of the future—5G, supercomputing, AI, biotech, electric cars and batteries and more. China already leads the United States in electric car production, while US automakers are hobbled by a shortage of semiconductor chips, most of which are manufactured in Taiwan, China and South Korea.

Our national security also is at stake. China has been rapidly translating its economic clout into military power, with an eye toward a shotgun wedding with a democratic Taiwan; establishing hegemony over the surrounding seas; and pushing the United States out of East Asia.

To be sure, China's rise isn't inexorable. Hit hard by weakening global demand and a stern policy of "zero Covid" lockdowns at home, its economic growth rate recently has fallen by about half. Having been awarded an unprecedented third term by a compliant CCP in October, Xi continues to consolidate power in what looks like a return to a Mao-style dictatorship.

Xi has reined in China's high-flying tech giants and is steadily extinguishing Hong Kong's once-vibrant democracy. He has matched harsh repression at home with an aggressive "wolf warrior" diplomacy aimed at intimidating Taiwan and China's neighbors and silencing international criticism of Beijing's predatory trade practices, ethnic cleansing of Muslim Uyghurs and status as the world's biggest carbon emitter.

These self-isolating policies have bred security fears across East Asia and triggered a strong political backlash in the United States and Europe. Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to assume that China can't change course. Its stunning national development over the past four decades shows that the United States can no longer take for granted our century-old status as the world's biggest and most advanced economy.

Americans are faced with a clear choice: we can resign ourselves to being surpassed eventually by a Chinese economic and military superpower, or we can raise our game.

The global achievement gap

For America's public schools, that means a new resolve to narrow the global achievement gap. International comparisons of student performance indicate that our students have fallen well behind their counterparts in China and the Asia-Pacific.

For example, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a worldwide study that periodically compares the performance of 15-year-olds in 78 nations on mathematics, science and reading.

The latest PISA results show that in 2018, the United States ranked an underwhelming 25th in the world in average math, science and reading scores. Breaking the scores down, the US ranked 37th in math, 18th in science and 13th in reading. Chinese students were number one in each subject.

But perhaps the most dismal headline from the PISA tests is this: the performance of US teenagers in reading and math has been stagnant since 2000, despite federal efforts to raise academic standards and create financial incentives for school improvement.

Andreas Schleicher, director for education and skills at the OECD, is one of the chief architects of the test. Comparing scores, he found that about a fifth of American 15-year-olds hadn't achieved the reading levels expected of 10-year-olds and consequently face "pretty grim prospects" in the labor market.

Also illuminating are the results of the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). These tests measure math and science achievement in fourth and fifth grade every four years.

According to the latest TIMSS results, US fourth graders ranked 15th among 64 participating education systems in math and eighth in science. Singapore and China were ranked first and second. US eighth graders ranked 11th of 46 in science and 11th in math.

Crucially, the TIMSS tests illuminate wide performance gaps between America's top- and bottom-performing eighth graders. On math, for example, the US gap is larger than the gap in 31 of the 45 other participating systems.

Although many US students perform at high levels, these international tests show that, on

For America's public schools, that means a new resolve to narrow the global achievement gap.

Biden should challenge state and local school authorities to make our schools second to none in the world.

average, US students significantly underperform their peers in China and other Asian countries on math, reading and science. The tests also highlight yawning performance gaps that reflect America's deeply entrenched social and racial inequities.

These achievement gaps will not be closed overnight. So it's all the more important that our political and education leaders start now by benchmarking US students' academic progress against the high levels of proficiency in reading, math and science achieved by students in China and other Asian competitors.

A call for national leadership

It's a formidable challenge—and President Biden ought to take it up. In fact, it's hard to think of an American institution more ripe for “building back better” than our public schools. They are both formative to American citizenship at a time when democratic norms are under political attack at home and essential to our capacity to innovate and grow at a time when America's long run of economic primacy faces a determined challenge from China.

Although public education in the United States always has been a primarily local responsibility, there is a Cold War precedent for invoking national interests and security to rally public support for a dramatic upgrade of school quality. In the late 1950s, the Soviet Union launched Sputnik, the world's first satellite. This shocked a complacent America, prompting Congress to

pass the landmark National Defense Education Act in 1958.

The law explicitly made improving public schools a national security imperative, galvanizing federal investments in science, technology and math education. In fact, it marked the beginning of Washington's large-scale involvement in elementary and secondary schools, preceding the equity-oriented federal interventions of the 1960s.

Today, our political leaders should again forge a broad public consensus for harnessing public education as a national strategy for promoting science, frontier technologies and high-tech entrepreneurship. Equally as important, we need dramatic improvements in school quality to ensure that our students acquire skills comparable to those of our toughest competitors.

Hackneyed calls for new “moonshots” and Marshall Plans to solve this problem or that litter US political discourse. Nonetheless, only presidents have the standing to set urgent national goals. In the spirit of JFK's race to the moon, Biden should challenge state and local school authorities to make our schools second to none in the world—and for all our students. In this way, the president could tap into both Americans' patriotism and their love of competition.

Reaching for world-class standards of performance doesn't mean making America's schools more like China's. The highly regimented way students learn in authoritarian countries with a collectivist ethos will not work in a liberal country like ours that values individual liberty and initiative.

China places a heavy emphasis on rote memorization and rigorous drilling for tests. The American path to educational excellence will be different, putting greater emphasis on creativity, inquiry-based approaches, diverse curricula and personalized learning. Nonetheless, US students will have to do a better job of mastering the fundamentals of reading, math and science, and here the international tests like PISA and TIMSS can help us mark progress toward closing the gap.

Complicating this challenge are the steep learning losses American students experienced when schools shut down during the Covid pandemic. The latest report from the National Assessment of Education Progress shows sharp declines in math and reading proficiency among students of all backgrounds in most states.

Only 36 percent of US fourth graders and 26 percent of eighth graders scored proficient or above on math tests. For reading proficiency, the scores were 33 percent for fourth graders and 31 percent for eighth graders.

These domestic test results, of course, augur ill for how America's kids are likely to score in the next round of international assessments. US public school leaders need to go all out to make up for pandemic learning losses, which also will help prepare US students to chip away at the international achievement gap on math, reading and science.

Invest in change, not the status quo

Another good reason to act now is that schools are awash with money. Since March 2020, Congress has passed a slew of pandemic relief bills that have included \$200 billion for K–12 education. President Biden's March 2021 American Rescue Plan alone includes \$125 billion, the largest-ever federal investment in public schools. In July 2021, Congress passed President Biden's CHIPS and Science Act, which included \$13 billion to bolster STEM in K–12, postsecondary schools and job-training programs.

Public schools can use this extraordinary federal bounty in a wide variety of ways. These include helping tackle pandemic learning losses with extended school years, after-school programs, summer school and tutoring. Schools can also spend federal dollars to upgrade facilities for healthy learning environments, equip students with wraparound social supports and stabilize and diversify the school workforce.

These are all important goals. But simply pouring money into our legacy education system, which wasn't yielding the results we need

pre-pandemic, is hardly the way to construct the more nimble, resilient and responsive public schools Americans have a right to expect post-pandemic.

The Covid shutdowns thrust America's parents deep into the world of their children's schools and the adults who run them. For many, the experience has been anything but confidence-inspiring. In addition to being fed up with school closures and steep learning losses, many parents are frustrated because they think school officials don't listen to them. Popular pressure for change in how schools operate is building, and a crucial question is whether it will merely inflame our country's tribal divides or give fresh impetus to modernizing an outdated public education system.

In the first scenario, public schools become the new front in America's culture wars. In 2021, Republican Glenn Youngkin won an upset victory in Virginia's gubernatorial contest by exploiting parents' anger over a wide array of school-related grievances, from broadly shared concerns about shutdowns and unresponsive district bureaucracies to such right-wing bugaboos as mask and vaccine mandates and critical race theory.

This mix of fact and myth became the template for Republican candidates in the 2022 midterm elections. Although education was eclipsed by voters' concerns over inflation, abortion and threats to democracy, it's worth noting that one of the midterm's biggest winners was Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, an ardent GOP proponent of "parent power."

In the second scenario, public consternation over how the pandemic has magnified all the pathologies of our legacy K–12 system—stubborn class and racial inequities, bureaucratic rigidity and inertia, antiquated labor relations and standardized, one-size-fits-all instruction yielding mediocre results—feeds cross-partisan demands for systemic change.

Americans who believe in equal educational opportunity and inclusive prosperity should be rooting for the second scenario. There's a huge

opportunity here for President Biden to speak to the public's post-pandemic hunger for sweeping changes in their K–12 schools.

As the Progressive Policy Institute (PPI) has documented, a new, 21st-century model for public education is incubating in such pioneering cities as New Orleans, Denver, Indianapolis, San Antonio, Newark and Washington, DC. The emerging model is built on parental choice of public schools, a shift in decision-making power from central bureaucracies to school leaders, diverse curricula, personalized learning and rigorously enforced performance contracts.

These and other hubs of innovation are producing new kinds of schools that go by a variety of names: innovation schools, renaissance schools, partnership schools and contract schools. Where these reinvention efforts have reached critical mass, gains in student attainment have been dramatically positive. As the PPI has documented, over the past 15 years, urban school districts that embrace the 21st-century model—offering families a choice of public schools, shifting decisions from central bureaucrats to autonomous public charter schools and holding these schools strictly accountable for performance—have produced the fastest academic gains among disadvantaged urban students.

In sifting through the PISA results, PPI analysts David Osborne and Tressa Pankovits report that OECD has detected positive effects for school autonomy, a key feature of the 21st-century model: “OECD found that the greater the number of schools with the responsibility to define and elaborate their curricula and assessments, the better the performance of a country's school system, even after accounting for national income.”

In addition to more parental choice and school autonomy, a modernized K–12 system should be charged with creating more seamless transitions from school to work, especially for the 60 percent of young Americans who do not get college degrees. They deserve better than a binary choice between high-cost college

Another good reason to act now is that schools are awash with money.

degrees they may not need and low-quality public training programs. And whether college-bound or not, US students should learn about how job markets work and have opportunities for apprenticeships and other work-learning opportunities with local employers before they graduate from high school.

President Biden should use his bully pulpit to make closing the international achievement gap a national priority. He could take as his model the 1989 Education Summit in Charlottesville, Virginia. Cohosted by President George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton, then governor of Arkansas and chair of the National Governors Association, the summit convened 49 governors to focus exclusively on raising education standards.

Such a display of bipartisanship may seem inconceivable amid today's red-blue culture wars. But Biden was elected in part to rise above today's virulently negative partisanship, and Republican governors presumably are as eager as their Democratic counterparts to see America prevail in the intensifying contest with China for economic preeminence.

The Charlottesville summit was inspired by the landmark 1983 report *A Nation at Risk*, which warned that the lackluster performance of US schools and students was imperiling America's economic security. Biden could use a successor summit to challenge governors to use unspent federal education dollars to align state standards and tests with those in countries that dominate the international proficiency rankings.

Governors have their own discretionary Covid recovery funds (the Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund), which should be dedicated

to closing an international achievement gap exacerbated by the pandemic learning losses and our slow reopening of schools. They could also tap into a large pool of unspent money in the states' Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund to invest in dual enrollment programs that allow high school students to enter college early and earn credits. Biden could also promise federal money to extend such gap-closing efforts past the 2024 deadline for spending American Rescue Plan funds.

Reinventing America's public schools will require challenging stale dogmas on both ends of the political spectrum: the right's insistence that the supposedly sacrosanct principle of "local control" trumps our national interest in a modern education system that supports US global competitiveness and the left's defense of yesterday's bureaucratic and highly centralized K-12 school model as the one true way to deliver public education for all times.

The United States is trying to prepare its young to compete in the knowledge economy with a factory-style school system designed for the industrial era of more than a century ago.

Reinventing America's public schools will require challenging stale dogmas on both ends of the political spectrum.

Amid populist attacks and rising public frustration with that system, it's time to acknowledge that new school models aren't a threat to the public education ideal, but the way to save it.

DISTANCE TO 100: AN ALTERNATIVE TO RACIAL ACHIEVEMENT GAPS

Ian Rowe

Policymakers and practitioners can do only so much to solve any problem without a clear, unbiased view of the underlying causes. Educators today have failed to improve student achievement largely because we use an inadequate conceptual framework to understand poor academic performance.

The prevailing national lens for interpreting student progress or lack of it is the achievement gap. Student performance levels are typically disaggregated by racial and economic categories, and then disparities are identified within those categories—black versus white, rich versus poor, etc.

For the past half century, the mission statement of virtually every education reform organization has included earnest language around closing the achievement gap. In 2010, former US Secretary of Education Rod Paige, who served in a Republican administration, cowrote a book titled *The Black-White Achievement Gap: Why Closing It Is the Greatest Civil Rights Issue of Our Time*. Nearly a decade later, former Secretary of Education John B. King Jr., who served in a Democratic administration, wrote an essay titled “Education Remains the Civil Rights Issue of Our Time.” Left and right, policymakers and educators agree that the achievement gap is the most important civil rights issue we face.

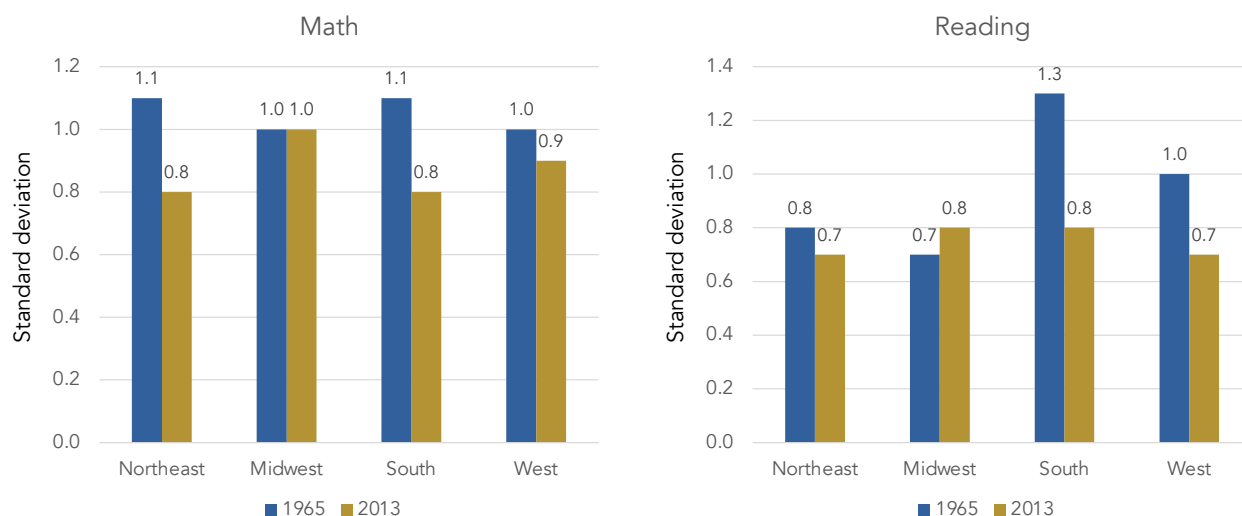
After 50 years, the achievement gap between white and black students has barely narrowed.

Unfortunately, our five-decade obsession with closing achievement gaps has yielded little progress. Four leading education researchers including Stanford professors Eric Hanushek and Paul Peterson published a study in 2019 concluding that “the opportunity gap—that is, the relationship between socioeconomic status and achievement—has not grown over the past 50 years. But neither has it closed. Instead, the gap between the haves and have-nots has persisted.”

The same basic conclusion holds true for race. As Figure 1 shows, after 50 years, the achievement gap between white and black students has barely narrowed.

Hanushek explains the challenge we face: “After nearly a half century of supposed progress in race relations within the United States, the modest improvements in achievement gaps since 1965 can only be called a national embarrassment.”

Figure 1. The white-black achievement gap persists



Sources: "Equality of Education Opportunity" (1966), Table 3.121.3; National Assessment of Education Progress, National Center for Education Statistics.

How do we explain this lack of success? Among other reasons, the achievement gap is a poor tool for understanding student failure or promoting student achievement. It falls flat in three important ways.

First, our obsession with the achievement gap masks a deeper challenge—notably our collective failure to teach literacy and build verbal proficiency across all races and classes. Consider that in 2019, before Covid-19 lockdowns and learning declines, only one-third of all eighth-grade students scored "proficient" on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in reading. And in no year since the "Nation's Report Card" was first administered in 1992 has a majority of *white* students been reading at grade level. The sad irony is that closing the black-white achievement gap would guarantee only educational mediocrity for all students.

Second, our preoccupation with closing racial and economic achievement gaps ushered in a kind of blinkered, reductive thinking that crowds out educators' ability to identify creative solutions across demographic categories. Educators

bombarded by statistics on the racial achievement gap are, unsurprisingly, inclined to believe that underachievement is rooted in racism. A deeper look would shatter this notion that systematic racism is the sole or even primary cause of low proficiency rates among black and Hispanic Americans.

In 1966, sociologist James Coleman published a landmark 700-page study of educational opportunity known as the Coleman Report, which drew on data from more than 645,000 students and teachers in 4,000 US public schools. Among its most controversial findings was that family background—not schools, funding, religion or race—was the only characteristic with a consistent causal relationship to academic performance. The report summarized:

One implication stands out above all: That schools bring little influence to bear on a child's achievement that is independent of his background and general social context; and that this very lack of an independent effect means that the inequalities imposed

on children by their home, neighborhood, and peer environment are carried along to become the inequalities with which they confront adult life at the end of school.

Many studies analyzing student characteristics show the importance of family structure over other factors, including race. But most educators and policymakers ignore these data, leaving them more likely to misdiagnose why kids are not succeeding and less likely to pursue creative solutions that would better equip the rising generation to succeed in school.

Third, many of the remedies that arise from our single-minded focus on racial achievement gaps yield counterproductive results. For example, many educators who are led to believe that racism is the primary cause of student underachievement are eager to participate in diversity and equity training rooted in critical race theory or so-called anti-racist ideology. But research suggests such training has a downside. University of London researcher Eric Kaufmann has found that reading even a brief passage from Ta-Nehisi Coates's "Letter to My Son"—which paints America as a nation built on historical and present-day systems of racial oppression—"was enough to reduce black respondents' sense of control over their lives." And this lack of control can easily extend far beyond the classroom.

Even talking about the achievement gap can have adverse consequences for children. When participants in a study conducted by University of Southern California researcher David Quinn were randomly assigned to view a TV news story about the differential achievement of black and white learners, Quinn found that content emphasizing the gap caused participants to underestimate the capabilities of black students. Rather than boost minority outcomes, the focus on "gaps" reinforced notions of black inferiority and white superiority.

In short, the achievement gap has consistently proved a poor conceptual underpinning for educators seeking to improve student outcomes. We need a better framework.

Fortunately, there is an alternative approach. Instead of our current strategy grounded in race- and class-based gaps, I propose a strategy I call "Distance to 100." This framework recognizes that every educator's ultimate goal is to prepare all students for success. Instead of focusing on racial differences, we should strive to help 100 percent of students test at grade level in every subject.

A "Distance to 100" approach would emphasize the gap between current performance levels and 100 percent proficiency for all students. Analyses of demographic subgroups would not pit one group against another, as do current analyses based on the racial and economic achievement gaps. Instead, they would compare each group to 100 percent proficiency.

Why is "Distance to 100" a better option? It would enable educators to identify the root causes of poor student achievement and craft solutions that actually address these challenges now and in the future.

For example, millennials of all races are much more likely to flourish financially if they follow what is often referred to as the "success sequence"—getting at least a high school degree, working full-time and marrying, in that order, before having children. Indeed, according to a 2017 study by the American Enterprise Institute, 97 percent of millennials who follow that sequence are not poor by the time they reach their prime young adult years, ages 28–34. This path to young adulthood is also among the most likely to lead to economic success and stronger family formation for the rising generation.

Many studies of student outcomes show the importance of family structure over other factors, including race.

Building on what we know from the Coleman study and other research on the critical relationship between stable families and positive academic results, why wouldn't we make teaching the success sequence in middle and high school part of an expanded solution set to improve academic and life outcomes?

The charter schools I run in New York City teach the success sequence in a descriptive rather than prescriptive fashion, describing it as one of several pathways with varying rewards and consequences. This may not be the best approach for every school or child. But it demonstrates what can be done—an alternative to the usual suspect focus on race and class that achievement-gap thinking often entails.

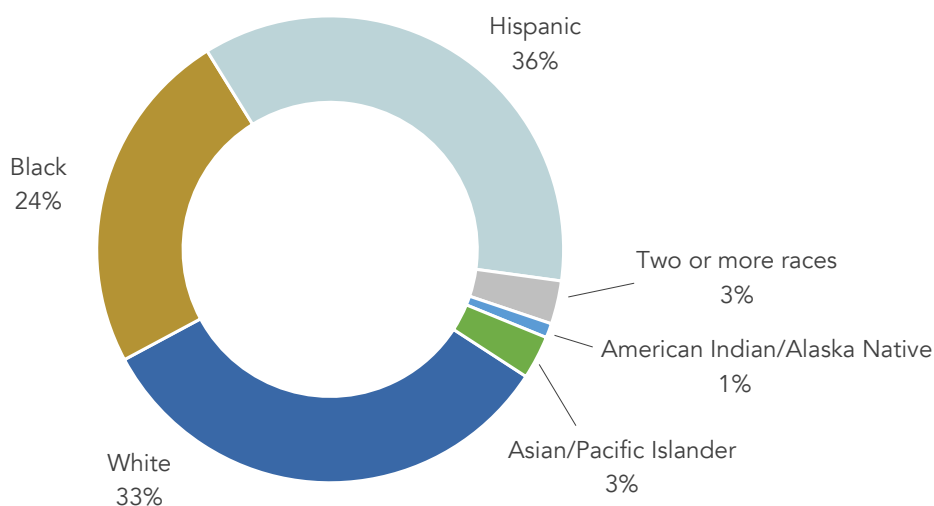
Educators no longer blinded by demographic achievement gaps would quickly discover that roughly equal numbers of black, white and Hispanic students are reading below grade level nationally. (See Figure 2.) This matters because teachers work with individuals, not racial or economic groups.

Freed from the old, tired rhetoric about achievement gaps, we might find a common cause for poor reading performance among all American students, regardless of race or class.

For decades, education experts from E. D. Hirsch to Dan Willingham to Natalie Wexler have made the case that our failure to teach reading and build background knowledge with content-rich curricula has had a devastating impact on all of America's children. Wexler outlines the dilemma well in her book, *The Knowledge Gap: The Hidden Cause of America's Broken Education System—And How to Fix It*:

As far back as 1977, early-elementary teachers spent more than twice as much time on reading as on science and social studies combined. But since 2001, when the federal No Child Left Behind legislation made standardized reading and math scores the yardstick for measuring progress, the time devoted to both subjects has only grown. In turn, the amount of time spent on social studies and science has

Figure 2. Racial/ethnic composition of lower-performing students in NAEP grade 8 reading, 2019



Source: Institute of Education Sciences.

plummeted—especially in schools where test scores are low.

The lesson: schools must go beyond reading instruction, focusing more intently on content-rich subjects like history, science and the arts to grow vocabulary and introduce children to the broader world of learning. As E. D. Hirsch has noted: “When children are offered coherent, cumulative knowledge from preschool on, reading proficiency is the result.”

A “Distance to 100” approach would also carve out space for new and creative kinds of data reporting. How we picture information shapes our thoughts, and we need new, more accurate images to help us diagnose why so many students are having trouble in school. Rather than—or at least in addition to—the normal representations of proficiency by race, class and gender, researchers must find ways to depict individual students’ performance, including with geographic distributions, multivariate analyses and scatterplot analyses.

Scatterplot analyses, for example, may reveal that there are many kids from each racial and ethnic background in the top and bottom tiers of student performance. Could it be that universal factors like the number of hours spent studying or reading is the common denominator for the top-tier group and thus the primary intervention to be pursued for lower-performing students?

Other analyses might reveal that geography—a geographically concentrated lack of access to rich curricula or high-quality schools—rather than race is at the root of some students’ poor performance. If education officials can identify locations with entrenched underperformance, they may be compelled to expand

Schools must go beyond reading instruction, focusing more intently on content-rich subjects like history, science and the arts.

school options and work to empower every family to find the right place for their child.

Ultimately, a “Distance to 100” approach is premised on the notion that a new, creative understanding of data and the representation of data will help educators unearth opportunities to improve student achievement. Such presentations would begin to confront the narrative that group identity defines performance and instead force us to look for factors that transcend race, gender and class.

As Hanushek and his colleagues state in their 2019 paper, “The stubborn endurance of achievement inequalities suggests the need to reconsider policies and practices aimed at shrinking the gap. Although policymakers have repeatedly tried to break the link between students’ learning and their socioeconomic background, these interventions thus far have been unable to dent the relationship between socioeconomic status and achievement. Perhaps it is time to consider alternatives.”

“Distance to 100” for every child can be that empowering alternative.

RETHINKING ACCOUNTABILITY

John Bailey

America's current approach to accountability in education was a reaction to troubling academic performance, particularly among underserved children. Policy-makers and practitioners on the left and right came together to establish clear academic expectations for students, assess student progress toward achieving those standards and use the resulting performance data to identify struggling schools and provide needed interventions. Two decades later, accountability has not produced the expected improvements or transformative changes that were promised, and support is diminishing.

A reimagined approach can retain the best of what exists, including high-quality assessments and high academic expectations aligned with those of colleges and employers. But instead of a top-down, sanctions-driven approach, education should leverage the value-based payment systems that have been at the center of recent health care reform to create financial incentives for attaining quality indicators and outcomes.

Background

For more than 20 years, the federal government has attempted to improve student outcomes with policies and practices designed to measure and hold schools responsible for student achievement. So-called "accountability systems" have traditionally consisted of three com-

Instead of a top-down, sanctions-driven approach, education should leverage value-based payment systems like those at the center of recent health care reform.

ponents. First, they outline the expectations of what quality means, often expressed in the form of academic standards. Second, they measure student progress toward meeting those standards, often, but not always, using standardized testing. Third, they attach rewards and consequences to these outcomes, often triggering additional resources for schools or interventions for struggling students.

Congress embraced this framework in 2001 with passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Passed with bipartisan support of a kind rarely seen since—in the House by a vote of 381–41 and in the Senate by 87–10—NCLB required states to set high academic standards and then test students annually in reading and math. Test results had to be disaggregated, with reporting for different subgroups of students,

including English learners, students in special education, racial and ethnic groups and low-income children. These data fed a formula for measuring “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) toward a national goal—that all students would be proficient in math and reading by the 2013–14 school year. That formula was also used to identify high- and low-performing schools, and it triggered interventions intended to turn around persistently underperforming schools.

The next evolution of accountability grew out of research commissioned by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in 2007: a new wave of reforms aimed at improving declining high school graduation rates. Governors committed to establishing a common approach to calculating graduation rates, and the Obama administration launched a series of policies intended to boost high school completion and ensure more students were ready for college.

Still another round of reform emerged in 2009, when 48 states and the District of Columbia signed an agreement with the National Governors Association (NGA) and Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), committing to a state-led process to develop a common set of academic standards. This effort was in response to a weakness in the NCLB framework, which created perverse incentives for states to lower their academic standards to artificially boost performance.

June 2010 saw the release of the Common Core State Standards for English language arts and mathematics (CCSS). Each state had a different process to formally vet and approve the standards, and eventually more than 47 states adopted them. But support quickly began to erode amid concerns that federal policy was incentivizing or coercing states to adopt the standards. In response, several states repealed the standards, while others modified them.

In 2015, Congress replaced NCLB with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). This new federal framework maintained the broad contours of the old accountability system but eliminated NCLB’s reliance on AYP formulas. States

were given discretion to use multiple measures of student achievement and other metrics of student performance. Performance time lines were more flexible, as were the interventions that could be used to turn around struggling school systems. The law established stricter prohibitions on the federal government’s ability to influence standards and curricula. It also authorized pilot studies of innovative assessment systems designed to inform the next round of federal lawmaking on education.

The growing challenges with accountability systems

The evolution of accountability frameworks has preserved most of the key features of annual assessments and systems to identify struggling schools. Yet despite additional flexibility and reforms, support for accountability has eroded for several reasons.

Better tests, but confusing reports. The quality of standardized assessments has dramatically improved since NCLB. Assessments are better aligned to higher-quality standards, and higher cutoff scores provide a truer measure of student proficiency. Some state assessments have also leveraged technologies that allow for more essays and short-answer prompts as a means to assess students’ reasoning and critical thinking.

But state reporting—how and when test results are shared—has not kept pace with these technical improvements. Teachers and parents still receive reports months after students sit for assessments and much too late to take action. The reports are often confusing, providing statistical results but little other information or insight. As a result, assessments are losing their relevance and usefulness for the stakeholders they are intended to inform, most importantly teachers and parents.

More transparency, but more confusion. Federal reporting requirements were intended to better inform parents, taxpayers and public

policymakers, but in many instances the data and reports have made it more difficult to understand achievement trends. Some states give schools two grades, while others, like California, have used a confusing five-tiered, color-coded system.

Many states are still not reporting what is required under current law. For example, in 2019, 24 states did not include all the required teacher data—inexperienced teachers, teachers with emergency or provisional credentials and out-of-field teachers—on their report cards. State report cards are often difficult to find and confusing to understand. A Data Quality Campaign analysis found that the language on report cards is often at a college reading level, rather than a friendlier eighth grade level or below.

The result is a data-rich but information-poor environment that leaves parents less informed and empowered.

Overpromised, under-delivered. The promise of accountability was that it would focus resources and attention on schools and students that need the most help. Students of color who were too often ignored and hidden behind the averages would receive additional support to close the achievement gap. Performance data would mobilize parents and taxpayers to demand better for their students and communities.

But decades of experimentation and effort have failed to produce the promised results. Stagnating progress has frustrated parents and eroded political goodwill, leaving the education reform community squinting to find progress it can point to. The lack of more substantial results, for individual children and across the system as a whole, has caused many parents and community members to ask a reasonable question: do these limited benefits outweigh the costs?

The failure of turnarounds. Perhaps the most disappointing aspect of the existing approach to accountability has been educators' widespread inability to turn around low-performing

Many states are still not reporting what is required under current law.

schools. Policymakers have tinkered with indicators and weighted measures to better identify struggling schools. But they have yet to figure out how to take a struggling school and turn it into a high performer.

NCLB used an escalating set of interventions. The Obama administration tried allowing high-performing charter networks to take over persistently low-performing schools, with little success. Billions of dollars were allocated through federal School Improvement Grants (SIG) to the states. Yet as one evaluation stated, "Overall, across all grades, we found that implementing any SIG-funded model had no significant impacts on math or reading test scores, high school graduation, or college enrollment." The challenge we face is not identifying low-performing schools. The real issue is the failure of accountability systems to boost student improvement and turn around schools that aren't performing.

Rethinking accountability

Three years of disrupted learning due to the pandemic create an opportunity for policymakers to chart a new course. Such an effort should proceed along four tracks.

Setting clear expectations. State leaders need to establish clear expectations for what students should know and be able to do by the time they graduate from high school. These expectations should be anchored in what employers expect of skilled workers and what students need to know to enroll in college classes without remediation.

These expectations should be our North Star. Not just accountability but education systems

should be built on this foundation, which can also guide our thinking about career-focused education and so-called “pathways” programs.

Improving assessments. Assessments, for all their challenges, have provided critical insights into student performance and growth over time. But our approach should evolve to embrace more interim assessments administered throughout the school year. This would provide more timely data, allowing schools to take more immediate action while providing parents with a better sense of their children’s progress.

The CCSSO is exploring the possibility of using interim assessments to generate a summative score at the end of the year. Among the issues they face: the benefits of shorter assessments and more timely results come at the cost of additional logistical complexities and new policy challenges, including identifying testing windows.

Providing more data and better transparency. One of the primary criticisms of the classic approach to accountability is that it was too narrowly focused on what standardized tests can measure. A reimagined accountability system should encourage experimentation with new indicators of success that aren’t measured by test scores, including social and emotional learning data, school climate survey results and spending categories.

These data can also form the basis for deeper analysis of school performance, including measuring return on investment. The Center for American Progress has outlined methodologies to calculate the amount of academic achievement gained for each dollar spent, relative to other districts. It has also developed an “Adjusted Return on Investment” that uses a regression analysis to account for factors outside a district’s control, such as the added costs of educating low-income, non-English-speaking and special education students.

Piloting and publishing more data through state report cards can foster experimentation with new accountability indicators; it also provides greater transparency for parents and the public. At the very least, these data should be made available in open data formats to empower researchers and school evaluation services. For example, the nonprofit GreatSchools platform reaches a far wider set of parents than most state websites.

Strengthening improvement incentives. The most important and needed shift in a reimagined accountability system would be realigning the incentive for schools and school districts. The current accountability framework assumes that designating schools as low performing will command the public’s attention and focus the system’s resources toward improvement. Yet, this has not happened to the degree policymakers anticipated. Worse, financial incentives are misaligned with outcomes. Struggling schools receive more funding, while schools that improve or are high performing receive less.

This is not unique to public education. Until recently, health care had a similar problem. The much maligned fee-for-service structure rewarded the *quantity* of health care offered, not its *quality*. The same is true in education, where struggling schools are rewarded for the quantity of instructional interventions provided, not the improvement they produce. ESSA Title I funding supports “more” things—additional tutoring, extra minutes to an extended school day, added school days to a year. But there is no penalty for not

The much maligned fee-for-service structure rewarded the quantity of health care offered, not its quality.

improving student outcomes, nor is there any reward for improvement.

Health care can serve as inspiration for a reimagined education accountability system. Over the past two decades, policymakers have shifted the health care system toward value-based payment models that seek to drive systemic change—both greater efficiency and improved health outcomes. In contrast to fee-for-service models based on the volume of provided care, value-based payment models reimburse providers based on the quality of their care and reward providers for both efficiency and effectiveness.

The first step in the process was creating a system that pays providers for reporting quality measures. Health care professionals can now choose among more than 200 quality performance measures and 22 measure groups developed by doctors. In addition, hospitals are paid for administering a survey to patients that measures communications from doctors and nurses, the cleanliness of rooms, the responsiveness of staff, pain management and other aspects of care. The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) then gradually transitioned Medicare and other federal payment programs, moving to a model that pays providers for meeting the new metrics.

Education could adopt a similar approach. Groups of educators and subject matter experts could develop a list of quality outcomes ranging from academic indicators to social and emotional learning measures. State and federal government funding could then shift to providing a baseline of support with additional funding provided when the various outcomes are achieved.

This approach has several benefits. First, it would eliminate the micromanagement that plagues the existing top-down accountability system. Schools would have a menu of clear goals with maximum flexibility with which to achieve them. Second, it would allow for differentiated payments to provide higher levels of funding for meeting more difficult to reach

Schools would have a menu of clear goals with maximum flexibility with which to achieve them.

goals or helping underserved populations. In contrast to the current accountability system, which can discourage schools from enrolling struggling students, this could create a financial incentive for higher-performing schools to serve more such learners. Third, a new approach of this kind would allow for multiple measures ranging from leading indicators such as school climate to outcomes such as graduation rates, proficiency and student growth.

Conclusion

A reimagined accountability system must be relevant for parents and useful for teachers, and it must deliver results for students. The pandemic has disrupted the current system of accountability, producing three years of unreliable summative assessments. Yet this disruption has given state leaders permission to experiment, perhaps setting the table for a better accountability system in years to come.

What's needed goes beyond tinkering with the measures. It's long past time to fix the broken incentive systems that reward promises over results.

SCHOOL CHOICE AS ACCOUNTABILITY

Andrew Rotherham

Education reformers need an agenda that can cut across political lines, uniting warring factions and challenging the shortcomings of both Democratic and Republican policy proposals. That agenda must also fill the vacuum left by the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act—legislation that largely threw in the towel on school accountability.

The new reform agenda must go beyond helping families recover from the pandemic. It must empower them so their children enjoy lives of self-determination with agency and options. Most importantly, it must be positive and forward-looking—a vision for an improved school system better positioned to deliver results for students.

A tall order, especially in light of today's vitriolic politics? Yes.

But we have an agenda that fills that bill right in front of us: a more robust emphasis on school choice and more options for parents. Not choice for its own sake or as a distant cousin of accountability, as it has often been pursued in the past, but rather choice as a central part of a new thrust to make schools more responsive to parents and students.

Choice is an idea some on the left and some on the right can agree on. It brings public education more in line with the regulatory approach in other sectors of American life, combining consumer choice with public regulation. It can help make school systems more politically

Not choice for its own sake or as a distant cousin of accountability, but rather choice as part of a new thrust to make schools more responsive.

accountable to their constituents and make an ossified system more responsive.

Choice as accountability

Politically, school choice has been relatively successful—expanding slowly but steadily for more than 20 years.

Not all education reformers like it. In some reform circles, choice is seen as an existential threat. In others, it's a problem to be managed—a kind of crazy uncle to be contained and controlled. Even among the most zealous reformers, choice is sometimes viewed as a distraction from what they see as broader and more important, systemic reforms.

Nevertheless, over the decades, dozens of states have enacted a wide variety of choice plans. The Supreme Court has opened choice options to an ever wider array of schools since

its landmark 2002 *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* decision. And parents today enjoy considerably more school choice than a few decades ago. Yet choice hasn't produced the school accountability or responsiveness many supporters once hoped for.

The problem: choice is not expanding fast enough to offset a widespread lack of accountability.

Accountability—metrics and reporting requirements designed to hold schools responsible for measurable student outcomes—has been a core pillar of the education reforms of recent decades and with good reason. Accountability is essential to a high-performing public school system. Clear and measurable outcomes and logical consequences for failure help ensure that schools work for students rather than serving adult interests and politics.

Yet government-imposed school accountability requirements are under constant political attack. Special-interest groups press legislatures, state education agencies and school districts to modify and weaken accountability measures. Nonelected regulatory boards and public officials block—or just fail to implement—accountability metrics on the books.

Reformers can't ignore this political reality. Despite years of earnest effort, top-down, state-driven accountability has not succeeded politically in America. But nor can we afford to abandon meaningful public oversight of schools and greater transparency for families.

What's needed starts with a shift in the balance of power in education—schools held accountable by parents more than policymakers. That means greater transparency and genuine public oversight.

But it also means acknowledging the limitations of politically imposed school metrics and

Nor can we afford to abandon meaningful public oversight.

instead embracing choice as an equal driver of accountability. Parents need more options to advocate for themselves and, when necessary, exit their schools for other options as a way of not only securing a better education for their children but also creating greater pressure for change.

This has always been the promise of choice—a way to guarantee accountability. What's needed now is a political agenda to help us realize that promise: choice as an accountability system, not merely an adjunct to the accountability agenda.

The political landscape

School choice means many different things to different proponents. For some, it's about liberation politics and empowerment. For others, it's a technocratic approach to problems of efficiency, bureaucracy and political dysfunction. Still others see it as a way to increase the diversity of schools and create more customization in public education.

These are all important ideas, but incomplete substantively and politically. For instance, a liberation-oriented approach doesn't serve suburban students or generate the level of suburban political support necessary to advance broad reform. A market-based approach turns off many in communities historically not well served by markets or where problems of scarcity drive the political culture. Many parents are frustrated with their children's schools and hungry for alternatives, but others are happy with their options, and calls for radical change and upending the system understandably fall flat with them. To be politically successful, choice plans must create opportunities for proponents without threatening options that are popular with other parents.

Another way to understand this: in general, education reform proceeds along two axes. One is accountability, how much or how little. The other is choice, also how much or how little. And advocates for one strategy often neglect the other. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1. Two reform strategies – choice and accountability

STANDARDS	<p><i>High Standards, Low Choice</i></p> <p>A focus on what students should know and be able to do, with little concern for parental choice. Traditionally the position of national organizations such as Achieve, the Education Trust and the American Federation of Teachers.</p>	<p><i>High Standards, High Choice</i></p> <p>A focus on what students should know and be able to do but also openness to some choice schemes, charter schools and public-school choice. Generally the position of education centrists, groups like Democrats for Education Reform and establishment Republicans.</p>
	<p><i>Low Standards, Low Choice</i></p> <p>A focus on the institutional prerogatives of public schools. Resistance to holding schools accountable for measurable outcomes and providing school choices for parents. Traditionally the position of the National Education Association and anti-choice education interest groups.</p>	<p><i>Low Standards, High Choice</i></p> <p>Little focus on publicly defined outcomes for students and high priority on choice for parents. Traditionally the position held by libertarians, conservatives and alternative school advocates in the progressive community.</p>
	CHOICE	

Note: "Low standards" is shorthand for low adherence to state-driven academic standards. It doesn't imply favoring low-quality schools.

Some choice advocates, for example, have neglected academic standards, believing that market mechanisms would address school quality. Others are concerned that debates about standards and curricula provide fodder for the culture wars and that it's best to lower the temperature by leaving these matters to schools and parents.

For their part, many standards advocates have seen choice as a distraction from systemic reform. Concerned by the mixed record of suburban charter schools, the uneven track record of voucher programs or the tortuous politics of school choice, they opted to focus instead on what they saw as more fundamental changes to standards, curricula or financing.

But is this realistic? Are choice and accountability really separate, independent goals? In many other realms of American life, they aren't separate. They're linked.

In practice, most American industries combine public standards with consumer choice. In the US, we don't have "free" markets; we have regulated markets, particularly for things like automobiles, financial securities and food that can have harmful consequences if products don't meet minimal standards. We should approach education in the same way.

More importantly, in most walks of life, choice is regarded not as an adjunct to accountability but rather a form of accountability. Consumers send messages with their choices, and businesses with low consumer support fail. The consumer metaphor rankles many in education, but if we're honest, we must acknowledge that parents and families are essentially consumers of public education.

Accountability is not working, but choice as accountability is rarely tried

Accountability has been a core tenet of American education reform for more than half a century. In the 1960s, Senator Robert Kennedy argued vehemently for including measurement in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to drive more accountability for federal education dollars. Then came the minimum competency requirements of the 1970s, the reforms driven by the groundbreaking 1983 *A Nation at Risk* report, the standards movement President George H. W. Bush and then-Governor Bill Clinton launched in Charlottesville in 1989, the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994 and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001: every era brought new ideas and advances.

Then, in the past decade, something changed. President Barack Obama effectively ran up the white flag on the notion of using federal leverage to demand that states hold schools accountable. Instead, the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 kicked meaningful decisions about accountability back to the states. Even before the pandemic, student achievement was stagnating or falling in many states, and analysts were raising alarm about what was happening to the lowest-performing students. Then came the pandemic, an educational catastrophe for students already behind and those furthest from opportunity.

No matter how we define accountability—and definitions vary—our schools and school systems are falling short. One definition, all but abandoned, centers on agreed-upon standards and consequences for low outcomes. Instead, today's debates turn on whether there will be consequences for just the lowest 10 percent or 5 percent of schools, and it's often assumed that asking schools to get most kids over relatively low proficiency goals is unreasonable.

Another definition centers on transparency, and some states are making efforts to communicate clearly with parents. But other states have accountability systems few parents or even

educators can understand. Across the board, there is no consistency in reporting student results, and even voluntary efforts to create vetting practices have gotten little traction.

This is not acceptable. If politically derived accountability is unachievable, then we must find other ways to make schools more accountable and responsive to parents. One option we haven't tried in a meaningful or concerted way is blending choice and accountability—achieving accountability by means of choice.

This is not a new idea. States like Florida that have embraced choice have seen broad improvement in student outcomes, and research suggests that a robust charter sector can drive achievement across schools in the education market it serves.

Why hasn't the expansion of choice driven more responsiveness by educators? In many places, political compromises have dulled the impact of choice plans. Too many plans hold even failing schools harmless. In other districts, instead of changing to serve students better, the existing school system has responded politically to what it perceives as a competitive threat.

There has to be a better way. Effective education systems must align resources with constituent preferences, and choice plans should be designed with more of an eye toward empowering parents than sanctioning other schools.

Choice alone is insufficient

Let's be honest—choice alone won't solve everything.

The challenges start with hard-to-serve students. Even at scale, choice plans cannot meet the needs of all students—for example, those with disabilities or English language learners. A traditional public school system can use its size to concentrate resources for these students. Government, philanthropy and the private sector will need to support for-profit and nonprofit intermediary groups to help special populations and address market failures.

Public schools are an industry worth more than three-quarters of a trillion dollars a year.

Second, existing choice plans often fail to provide parents with the information they need to decide what's best for their children and navigate the education system. Parents need accessible, comparable and reliable information about all schools receiving public dollars.

Finally, in a nation beset by culture wars, some look to school choice as a release valve. And indeed, greater choice might lessen tensions around curricular decisions—whether, for instance, a school should focus on the arts or math and science or whether pedagogy should be “progressive” or “conservative.” But choice is not a long-term solution for our cultural division. A society that dodges fundamental questions about its history, values and collective identity cannot expect meaningful cohesion over time.

School choice is not new

The questions posed by school choice aren't new. We've been debating the proper relationship among family, school and the public purse since the nation's founding.

This issue has three dimensions. The first is normative—people have different views about families and the state. Some believe parents should have the primary say about their kid's schooling, no matter what it means for quality or outcomes. Others see value in the common school idea even when it impinges on families' choices.

The second dimension is empirical. After three decades of experimentation with charter schools, vouchers and school choice programs, there is ample evidence about what works and doesn't work. And by and large, the evidence

is positive—test scores, graduation rates and parental satisfaction improve modestly or substantially across various choice schemes. But there is variance, and choice is no guarantee of quality.

The third dimension is political. The reality is that public schools are an industry—an industry worth more than three-quarters of a trillion dollars a year. That means tremendous money and power are at stake in these debates, with all the inevitable consequences. Special interests seek advantage. Institutions defend the status quo. And activists weaponize what should be normative and empirical questions.

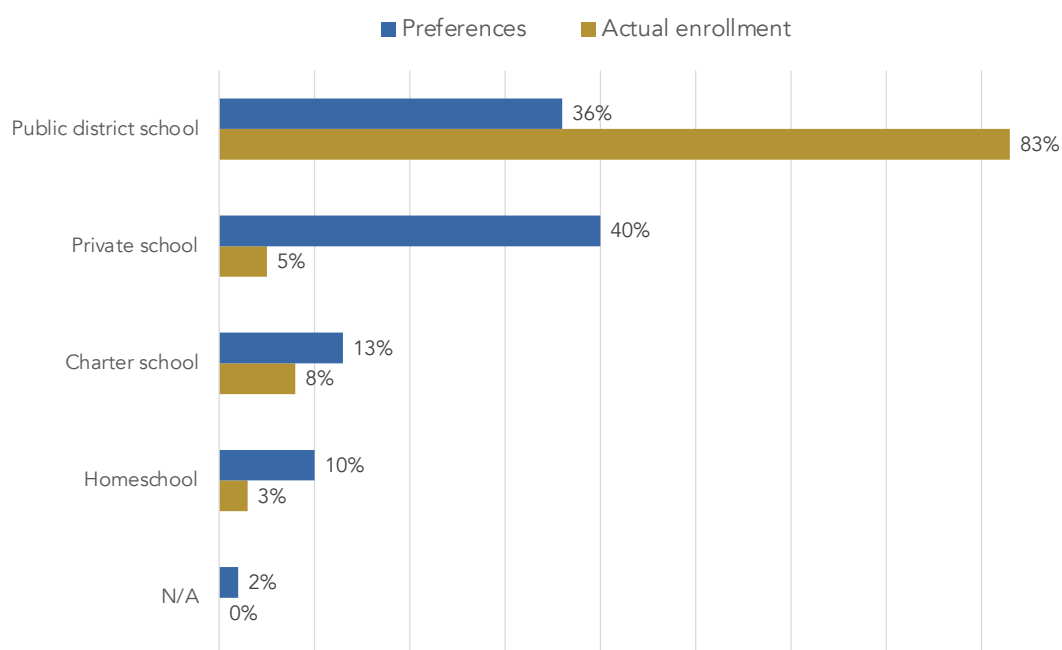
Choice has not always been a tool of empowerment. On the contrary, in the past, it was often used to disempower Black Americans. After the Supreme Court *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, Southern states enacted voucher schemes—and in places closed public schools—as a way to evade school integration, looking instead to private academies to perpetuate segregated education. Historically, not all choice measures have been well-intentioned or aimed at building a more inclusive America.

A new political synthesis

In 2023, both parties are promising parents more accountability. Republicans are championing greater rights for parents, while Democrats are seeking to reconnect families with public schools after the disastrous experience of the pandemic. But choice also has appeal on both sides of the political divide—or should.

Choice ought to be a core pillar of the Democratic equity agenda. It spells empowerment for low-income parents. It's an effective tool to reduce education “redlining” and the impact of housing segregation on school assignment. Instead, education is one of the few issues in which Democratic leaders oppose cash payments to low-income families and side with powerful special interests rather than consumers. Yet key constituencies of the party and broad public sentiment remain in favor of choice.

Figure 2. Parents' schooling preferences vs. actual enrollment



Source: EdTrust/Morning Consult.

School choice has long been a winning issue for the GOP and a rare issue on which many Republicans support direct cash transfers to the poor. But there is growing division about tactics—public school choice versus autonomous district schools, how much regulation is necessary and appropriate and just how far districts should go to ensure that choice is equitable.

These fractures on both sides of the aisle could mean there is no way forward for choice advocates. On the other hand, these tensions could create an opportunity to forge new coalitions and put pressure on both parties.

How would choice as accountability look in practice?

Some kinds of choice are more heavily regulated than others. For instance, charter schools, autonomous district schools and vouchers tend to be more regulated; tax-credit plans, less so. Reasonable people can disagree about what

would be most effective and equitable.

But to build a coalition, reformers should embrace three core ideas: choice, parental empowerment and responsiveness, shifting power toward parents and away from political control.

Charter schools. With effective oversight from authorizers and sufficient support, charter schools are proving popular and can be effective—especially in urban communities. As public schools that are publicly funded and open to all students but operated independently of traditional school districts, charters are getting impressive results in urban contexts on par with other schools in other settings.

Autonomous and magnet schools. Some districts that hesitate to allow independently operated charter schools are experimenting with autonomous and magnet schools. Under these schemes, districts operate and maintain

full control over schools, but students are not assigned solely based on where they live. This allows districts to respond to parental frustration about a lack of options and gives more students access to the kind of quality education often provided in math and science magnet schools.

Vouchers, education savings accounts and tax credits. Vouchers, education savings accounts and tax credits are also proving popular and expanding.

Nationwide, in 2021, seven states created new choice programs, while 15 states expanded 23 existing programs. Some 3.4 million students now attend roughly 7,800 public charter schools. And in the 2022 midterm elections, several Democratic governors campaigned in favor of school choice.

School finance reform. There will be no robust expansion of choice without school finance reform. Advocates on the left want more equitable finance policies, while those on the right want money to follow kids—a policy that works only with more equitable finance. There is a political grand bargain to be struck and an opportunity for a broad coalition.

What's needed is a new political dynamic that puts accountability in the hands of parents rather than government.

Conclusion

Politically derived school accountability has proved unsustainable—susceptible to interest-group pressure—and insufficient to drive dramatically better student outcomes. But the answer is not to walk away from transparency and accountability for results. What's needed is a new political dynamic that puts more power over accountability in the hands of parents rather than government—in other words, accountability by means of choice and choice as a key component of our accountability strategy.

PARENTS AND EDUCATORS NEED A BOLD NEW APPROACH TO COLLABORATING

Keri Rodrigues

Although we often say that parents are the first and most important teachers of our nation's children, many educators, administrators and policymakers fail to understand why such a critical stakeholder group with such an important role to play refuses to "engage" or participate in the education of their own children.

In today's political climate, it is popular to mouth the words "parents are our partners." But all too many educators don't mean it—they're just speaking out of fear of retribution at the next teacher conference, school board meeting or ballot box.

On one hand, parent education justice advocates are asked why we mothers and fathers refuse to "step up" and why families refuse to come to the table to "do our part" in helping our children, their students, achieve. On the other hand, schools struggle to understand the new outpouring of parent activism and advocacy, and they have bristled against a surge of parent engagement they cannot limit or control.

I see this disconnect up close in my role as cofounder and president of the National Parents Union. We have mapped nearly 3,000 parent-led advocacy and activist groups and built relationships with more than 600 partner organizations. In collaboration with these groups, we have conducted more than two dozen national polls

Many of us are living out the consequences of our own experiences in the public education system.

asking parents and families about their thoughts, feelings, problems and priorities for education and economic justice.

Many of us leading this work are also living out the consequences of our own experiences in the public education system.

In October 1994, I was expelled from my public high school. I had grown up in a family struggling with addiction and violence, and many of the teachers who filed reports of abuse and neglect against my parents were the same teachers who suspended me and eventually pushed me out of school. No one saw me as a child struggling in a difficult situation. The system viewed me as a waste of time and told me point-blank, "You'll end up dead or pregnant anyway."

Now a parent myself, I drop two of my children off every day at a building named for a principal who turned a blind eye, laughed at my

plea for a second chance and inflicted an emotional trauma that I still struggle with two and a half decades later. When I tell people where my children go to school, his name sticks in my throat—memories of that painful time linger even now.

Today, when I look at American public education, I see two main reasons why educators' efforts to engage with parents fail with predictable regularity—both of them directly related to a lack of respect on the part of educators, administrators and the system as a whole.

Educators don't understand modern families

The first issue is a lack of understanding of the parent and family ecosystem, the complexity of modern families and their lived experience.

This is a problem rooted in the past. Educators don't acknowledge the deep harm and trauma the education system inflicted in past decades on many parents, families and communities—particularly families of color. For many of us, asking us to engage with the public education system is asking us to partner with our abuser—an abuser who did not see our talents and then robbed us of access to opportunity.

The parents and families who stand before the education system today were once children who were victimized, abused or underserved by the same system just a generation ago. And now, we are expected to entrust this same system—and often the same people—with our most precious resource and prized possession, our children.

These people, places and systems inflicted not only emotional but economic trauma. How different would the lives of many of today's parents and families be if they had been given equitable access to opportunity when they were children? Yet we continue to indict underserved families for failing to find economic stability—while conveniently ignoring that economic stability has never been within their grasp.

The modern family has changed dramatically, while the education system's understanding of family relationships remains stuck in the past.

Meanwhile, the modern family has changed dramatically, while the education system's understanding of parents and family relationships remains stuck in the past. Working families, single parents, divorced families, blended families, grandparents and guardians raising children, LGBTQIA families and families affected by incarceration or addiction are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the wide range of modern American families.

Yet the system clings to a mid-century mindset, assuming that the majority of American families are white, two parent, single income and upper middle class. The expectation even today is that every parent and family will conform to this outmoded stereotype.

Schools that were created to cater to a majority-white population while intentionally excluding families of color have failed to evolve to meet the needs of a new generation of children living in communities transformed by cultural shifts rooted in race, ethnicity and economic conditions.

A new political climate

The second obstacle to meaningful parent and family engagement is the education system's pervasive disrespect for parents, families and communities.

This is not a new problem, but Covid-19 has shone a new light on it. The political climate has evolved in the wake of the pandemic and

the catastrophic failure of public education we watched playing out in our living rooms. The old sacred trust that educators counted on is gone. Schools can no longer assume that parents are hesitant to ask questions about their children's education or that families will trust schools to make decisions about children's short- or long-term futures.

The terms of engagement have changed. This is vitally important and necessary for our children, but the education system is struggling to understand and accept it. School administrators and school boards find themselves scrambling to respond to a growing public outcry for more transparency about educational outcomes and more accountability around how education dollars are spent. Yet instead of welcoming this new collaboration and co-creation with a new generation of parents, the system is holding tight to the status quo and the old tired transactional relationships.

During the pandemic, parents got used to being co-facilitators of their children's education, and now in the past two years, they have watched the system fail to respond to the post-pandemic education crisis. No wonder parents are refusing to yield decision-making power back to the system. Educators have grossly underestimated how their relationships with parents, families and communities have eroded.

A better way

The news is not all bad. Luckily for the bureaucrats running schools, parents and families have a vested interest in the success of public education, and they want to work collaboratively to create a path forward. That path must begin with concrete, intentional actions to restore trust and rebuild the fractured relationships now generating so much fear and anxiety between parents and educators.

The first step is transparency and accountability. Sunlight is the best disinfectant. School systems, administrators and educators must be radically transparent about their visions, plans,

programs, agendas and motivations. From there, they must be willing to bring parents, families and communities to the table. And parents need to be in the room from the beginning—participating in strategic planning, the budget process, leadership changes and contract negotiations. It's not enough to ask them for permission after decisions have already been made.

Educators must give serious consideration to the feedback they get from parents and families and be willing to modify their strategic plans or even scrap them completely based on what they hear from the people and communities they serve. We need radically courageous conversations about what is working and what isn't—and both sides must be flexible enough to change when plans do not yield the results our children deserve.

The second step is even harder. Educators must drop their colonialist mindset and replace their traditional authoritarian approach with one of understanding and empathy. Public education exists to serve people and communities. Parents and families bring cultural competency and expertise that can help educators do a better job and help schools function at their full potential.

Educators need to let go of their sense of superiority and adopt an approach based on assumed partnership with parents and families. Educators, administrators and school systems must accept that they cannot effectively serve a

Parents need to be in the room from the beginning. It's not enough to ask for their permission after decisions have been made.

UNLOCKING THE FUTURE

community unless they understand its context, culture and complexities—and that understanding cannot be achieved without relationships based on dignity and respect.

I am not unique. My personal experience is not unique. There are many leaders like me who have been able to heal from our past trauma and are now willing to build bridges of understanding so we can stop re-creating the mistakes of the past. I and millions of other parents

like me are devoting our lives to reimagining and re-creating our education system so it can better serve the children of today and tomorrow.

The momentous question we all face: will we allow petty political fights, institutional racism, an antiquated status quo and an instinct to put the priorities of adults over the needs of children to block the transformational change our children and families need?

THE FUTURE DEPENDS ON STUDENTS AND FAMILIES

Denise Forte

The data are available. The lived experiences have been reported. Both tell a similar story: the pandemic has wreaked havoc on America's education system, particularly for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds. Inequities that existed before Covid-19 have been exacerbated, and new shortcomings have emerged.

The unprecedented federal investment in schools seen during and after the pandemic will help us regain our footing and recover from historic levels of unfinished learning. But it must be combined with state- and district-level decision-making centered on those most affected by the pandemic. In this era of recovery, we must harness the wisdom of students and families to identify and implement equitable solutions to challenges old and new. It's time to put policies informed by real people to work for real people.

I grasped this truth firsthand several decades ago when I had the opportunity to learn from students experiencing homelessness while in college. I had been working on the federal law that supports elementary and secondary school students experiencing homelessness, but I had had little exposure to the challenges facing those trying to navigate postsecondary education.

Many spoke of the difficult choices they had to make every day just to stay in school. Many had to work full-time, but they were still expected to go to class and study. Others contrasted

This young woman reminded me how crucial it is to ground decision-making in engagement with those most affected by policy.

their circumstances with those of students who arrived at school accompanied by their families, with fully outfitted bedrooms and checking accounts. One story that stayed with me long after my visit: a young woman described how hard it was, well into the school year, to adjust to sleeping alone. Before college, she had lived in shelters or slept on couches and floors with friends and family.

At the time, I took pride in identifying the challenges students faced and shaping programs to dismantle those barriers. Yet here was a student's experience I could hardly imagine, one that was playing a significant role in whether she succeeded at college. We had thought about tuition costs, books, mentoring and other supports, and I was confident we were helping set students up for success. But hearing this young woman share her story with such intensity reminded me just how crucial it is to ground decision-making in authentic understanding

When classrooms closed, many schools relied on community organizations and families.

and open-minded engagement with the communities most affected by policy decisions.

If we have collectively learned anything about policymaking during the pandemic, that is the lesson. It's hard to remember another situation that required such momentous shifts in day-to-day living or new thinking from policymakers—with literal life-and-death consequences.

When classrooms closed, schools had to figure out how to locate their students, and many relied on community organizations and families. Then schools distributed digital devices, essential for remote learning. But devices alone did not solve the distance-learning puzzle. Additional needs emerged overnight—from internet service strong enough to handle Zoom calls on multiple devices to capacity building for parents who needed to communicate with teachers on confusing platforms. And how we responded to these challenges affected millions of students who might not otherwise have been able to continue learning through the pandemic. Especially in a distance-learning environment, authentic and supportive family engagement became key in identifying equity needs.

There's nothing new about the need to listen to students and families. In a 2020 op-ed, the Michigan state superintendent of public instruction issued a clear call to action to schools and districts across the country. The best way to ensure that every child receives a quality education, he declared, is to "continue to work with the widest range of community partners." Superintendents and principals with proven track records of leading school improvement have made the same case in interviews with The Education Trust: strong relationships with

students and families are central to academic achievement.

But the pandemic has reinforced the lesson. The future of K–12 education hinges on how well we work with students and families, and the promise of school improvement depends on bringing communities to the table to drive solutions.

Research demonstrates that partnerships between schools and families increase student achievement. Recent work by The Education Trust shows that family engagement can also benefit students' social emotional development. But family and community engagement in schools is not just about educators informing families about new practices. It must include working with families to develop solutions. And educators seeking to engage parents shouldn't overlook the entities already engaged in that important work: community-based organizations.

All too often, districts seeking to engage families check a box but don't involve parents in decision-making. They talk at parents rather than listening. Other districts don't consider parents' logistical needs for childcare, transportation or translation, so they miss out on crucial input. Research shows that parents of color consistently report barriers to school engagement, including feeling unwelcome and ignored by educators.

The good news is that community organizations can help. When schools engage parents through established community groups, the collaboration is often much more meaningful and effective.

Meeting the moment in Massachusetts

The Massachusetts Education Equity Partnership's (MEEP) first thought when the pandemic struck was about engaging families and communities. A locally rooted group convened and supported by The Education Trust in Massachusetts, the MEEP knew how critical it was for districts to consult with students and families

in developing remote-learning plans, and the group moved quickly to launch its #MeetTheMoment campaign.

One of the campaign's central goals was to "ensure that student and family perspectives inform policy and decision-making at every level of our education system, from the classroom to the State Legislature." MEEP helped bring the stories of families and students to bear on pressing decisions the state and districts were making. A partnership with NBC Boston—including Telemundo and New England Cable News—led to a series of web-based live events where students, families and educators shared their stories about learning in the pandemic. These "Hear Our Truth" forums reached thousands of viewers—including policymakers who later told advocates the events provided essential information about how Covid-19 was affecting families.

As part of its work with MEEP, The Education Trust's Massachusetts team worked with the MassINC Polling Group to conduct several surveys of 1,500 families, with over-samples of Black, Latino and Asian families, to better understand their experiences with education during the pandemic. The combination of polling data and family, student and educator perspectives shaped policy recommendations that the MEEP published in several forms over the following months, including its "Keeping Equity at the Forefront in Pandemic Recovery" tool kit for district leaders, which both the Massachusetts Department of Education and the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents shared with stakeholders in their newsletters.

MEEP's work illustrates a key tenet of equitable family and community engagement: ensuring that stakeholders have the tools they need to engage in meaningful conversations about decision-making. For MEEP, that involves consulting with community organizations on the ground to develop resources that support collaboration with schools and districts. Although state and federal laws require stakeholder engagement in developing K–12 spending

plans, reaching out to the community without careful thought and attention to capacity building can reduce conversations to top-down instructions about compliance. As the Massachusetts experience shows, community organizations and coalitions can help educators go deeper so stakeholders come to a table that has been set for them.

MEEP collaborates closely with several partner organizations that work directly with families and communities as they work to navigate school systems and secure resources for their children. When the pandemic struck and educators sought to engage families in decisions about how to use new federal and state funding to support students, these partners flagged the need for easily digestible resources that would help parents understand the funding available and what they could do to influence districts' spending decisions.

In response, MEEP created "The Future of Our Children," a tool kit for families and community advocates with easy-to-understand background information and questions to ask district leaders. Published in English and Spanish, the tool kit included frequently asked questions that explain Covid recovery funding, along with phone and email scripts parents could use when talking with their school or district. The tool kit helped families understand state and federal funding streams and requirements, and it laid the groundwork for districts to engage more effectively with parents based on a common understanding of resources and funding guidelines.

The promise of school improvement depends on bringing communities to the table.

Mobilizing local advocates in Maryland

A similar coalition emerged in Maryland in summer 2019 after the release of a report showing that Montgomery County Public Schools were not providing adequate opportunities or supports for Black and Latino students. Two local leaders launched the Black and Brown Coalition for Educational Equity and Excellence to drive parent and community involvement in local advocacy efforts. The coalition's first forum brought together 1,000 parents, students and members of the community to strategize together about a shared vision and advocacy priorities.

In the years since, the coalition has worked to help advocates understand school district data, budgeting and decision-making. It provides analyses of district data and end-of-year student achievement results and produces a newsletter for coalition members that includes news about opportunities to advocate with the district. The coalition also convenes groups of families and students to participate in conversations with district leaders about accountability.

Unlike some advocacy efforts that struggle to be inclusive and accessible, the Black and Brown Coalition shapes its activities around local advocates, working to break down barriers to engagement by welcoming new members with an orientation and paying for transportation to district meetings. The coalition now has dozens of community partners, and when its events are sparsely attended, it can collaborate with the district to turn out parents and others from the community.

A key lesson of the coalition's work: the importance of data and easy-to-understand background materials. The coalition strives to connect school data to evidence-based practices

Parents need data and easy-to-understand background materials.

and calls to action. And it makes it easy for parents and other members of the community to get involved. In Montgomery County, as in every community, school improvement depends on the strength of these partnerships and collaborative efforts.

Lessons from California

Community advocacy paid off in California in 2013, when state leaders redesigned K–12 spending to meet parents' demands for more equitable funding. The new Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) provides supplemental funds for local education agencies (LEAs)—districts, county offices of education and charter schools—that serve students from low-income backgrounds, youth in foster care and English language learners. LEAs where these groups account for 55 percent of students or more receive additional "concentration funds." And the state requires community engagement as part of the process districts must use to craft publicly accessible plans for education spending.

Nearly a decade later, The Education Trust's California office has analyzed the impact of LCFF, looking at how districts adjusted their approach to community engagement based on input from parents and local organizations. One district, Fresno Unified, changed its decision-making process after hearing feedback that it wasn't communicating effectively, and it now partners more closely with local community-based organizations to ensure families have a seat at the table when important issues are being discussed. It also cohosts forums and feedback events designed to increase engagement, and district leaders say their new approach has increased accountability.

Still, advocates caution that the pace of change is slow. Although the new funding formula has led to improvements in some districts, others struggle to make budgeting and decision-making transparent to parents. Educators withhold information or fail to explain what it means, thwarting community engagement.

The lesson for other states: California's shift to equitable funding was important but only a first step. Implementation has been uneven, and more attention is needed to ensure student and family engagement is informed and meaningful.

'Bring a folding chair'

All three examples underscore the importance of student and family engagement in district policymaking and school decisions. They also illustrate the challenges: effective engagement requires attention and effort by district leaders and community advocates alike. This was true before the pandemic, and it's even truer now. The upheaval of the past three years should only deepen our commitment to ensuring that

all education stakeholders are well-prepared to engage in action-focused planning to leverage federal and state resources, including pandemic recovery funding.

Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm taught us decades ago that those who have been shut out of policy conversations need to fight to be included. "If they don't give you a seat at the table," she urged, "bring a folding chair." Our role as education advocates is to insist on the importance of stakeholder engagement in policymaking even as we continue learning how to make that engagement truly authentic and accessible so that no one needs to bring a folding chair.

A NEW DEFINITION OF STUDENT SUCCESS

Frances Messano

As the pandemic creates an opportunity for a fresh start in K–12 education, now is the time to develop and align around a new definition of student success. The new definition should move beyond a sole focus on academics to ensuring that young people are supported to realize their full potential.

Any analysis of the current state of education paints a sobering picture, especially for low-income students and students of color. A recent study from the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University analyzed student outcomes from the 2020–21 school year. It found that in “high-poverty schools that stayed remote, students lost the equivalent of 22 weeks. In the districts that stayed remote for most of last year, the outcome was as if Black and Hispanic students had lost four to five more weeks of instruction than white students had.”

In a nationally representative survey of high school students in 2021, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported more than one-third of students experienced poor mental health outcomes. In addition, for students who had experienced racism, there was a higher prevalence of poor mental health outcomes. At the same time, total undergraduate enrollment has declined by 6.6 percent from fall 2019 to fall 2021, with college enrollments directly from high school dropping by 20.7 percent.

Our pandemic experience has created an urgent imperative for change. Students need

Students need environments where they feel like they belong and are supported, regardless of their identity.

learning environments where they can thrive, receiving the academic and mental health support they need as a foundation for learning. They need environments where they feel like they belong and are supported, regardless of their identity. They also need more navigational support to achieve their postsecondary goals, whether continued learning or workforce opportunities.

As the economy changes, students need a broad range of skills to compete for high-demand employment opportunities. According to a recent report from American Succeeds, businesses are seeking employees with “durable skills.” The report defines durable skills as the “combination of how you use what you know—skills like critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity—as well as character skills like fortitude, growth mindset, and leadership.” According to this research, 70 percent of the most requested skills in job postings

are durable skills, and jobs at the greatest risk of automation have lower demand for durable skills. K–12 education must prepare students to meet this future.

How should we define student success?

The Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago defined student success as “having the Agency to make active choices about one’s life path, possessing the Competencies to adapt to the demands of different contexts, and incorporating different aspects of oneself into an Integrated Identity.” In the K–12 educational context, this means students must graduate from high school prepared to realize the aspirations they have for themselves and their families and participate fully in society.

This requires a shift from a narrow focus on academic achievement to an emphasis on supporting young people to succeed in life. To get there, students must leave their secondary educational experience with a strong academic foundation, social-emotional competencies, an integrated identity and a clear plan of action.

Strong academic foundation. A strong academic foundation equips students to become lifelong learners. Young people need to be able to read, write and do math. Students need an accurate understanding of US and world history and how the principles of science affect our daily lives. They should be able to engage in interdisciplinary lessons that bring these core strands of knowledge together. When students understand the world around them, they can introduce new ideas and challenge others. But a focus on academics alone is not enough.

Social-emotional competencies. Social-emotional learning (SEL) is critical to lifelong success. CASEL, a nonprofit group focused on making evidence-based SEL an integral part of education, defines SEL as “the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply

Social-emotional learning is critical to lifelong success.

knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.” SEL helps students develop self-awareness, curiosity and empathy, as well as build strong relationships with their educators and classmates.

Key to SEL is the development of essential beliefs about oneself and one’s abilities. Among the most important: a *growth mindset*, defined as a belief that one’s abilities and skills can grow with effort; *self-efficacy*, the belief in one’s ability to succeed in achieving a goal; and a sense of *belonging*.

Integrated identity. Students must also develop a deep sense of self and an understanding of their identity, which includes their race or ethnicity, gender, religious beliefs and values. Identity is shaped in many ways, through family experiences and engagement with community and religious groups, as well as in school. It isn’t the role of school to form a student’s identity, but learning environments should provide students with the opportunity to learn more about themselves and others through rich content and educational experiences.

Clear plan of action. Young people must leave their K–12 experiences with clear goals, a plan of action for realizing those goals and a belief in their ability to achieve them. Goals should reflect students’ passions and interests, and their action plans should demonstrate an understanding of the steps they must complete to achieve their goals. In addition, students should have a clear understanding of the resources and

supports, including mentors and peers, they can access for navigational support and advice.

Few of the components of this expanded definition of student success are new. They have been documented by many researchers and practitioners, including our team at NewSchools Venture Fund. We have developed a framework and conducted a longitudinal analysis on our schools portfolio to identify the relationship between social-emotional competencies and academic success.

For example, we have found that students who believe their abilities and skills can grow with effort and who feel physically and emotionally safe at school demonstrate additional learning similar to moving from the 50th to the 67th percentile on nationally normed assessments. We also found that SEL and positive school cultures served as a protective factor against pandemic-era learning loss.

While there is broad support for a new definition of success, we are far from reaching consensus. Many believe that a focus on SEL will limit the amount of time that should be spent on academics. Others, such as parents recently surveyed by Fordham Institute, believe that families should play the primary role in educating their children on SEL skills. Despite this push-back, there is demand from employers, parents, students and educators to expand the focus of K–12 education.

How do we get there?

Broadening our definition of student success will require us to redesign schools, change our measurement systems and adopt new approaches to human capital. The good news is that strong models are emerging across the country, providing a road map for the path ahead.

New school models. Most schools were built for a different time and purpose. They were designed to sort students, separating those who would go on to college from those who would work in jobs available in their local communities.

Schools need flexibility to hire and fire staff, adopt new curricula and extend the school day.

Today, we need a wider variety of school options to help an increasingly diverse student population succeed in a changing economy. Schools should ensure children are on a pathway to success, helping them accelerate their learning in areas where they are already strong, get additional support in areas where they might have gaps and build critical skills and competencies for the future. In addition, students and parents should be able to choose school models that meet their needs best.

Creating these new models requires greater autonomy at the school level. This should include flexibility to hire and fire staff, adopt new curricula and extend the school day in exchange for reaching ambitious student success goals. This flexibility is a core part of the charter model, and we're seeing an increase in the number of district schools that have been granted these autonomies within empowerment zones. We should build on this momentum to ensure more school leaders can create models that support student success.

Over the past six years, NewSchools has invested \$90 million in a national portfolio of innovative public schools. When fully enrolled, they will serve 82,000 students, 73 percent of whom are Black or Latino and 70 percent who identify as low income. We supported 110 teams to open new schools and are supporting an additional 26 schools still in the planning stages. Eighty percent of these models are charter schools, 20 percent are district schools, and 55 percent are led by people of color.

We invest in an additional 20 schools every year and provide technical assistance to ensure they support students effectively. Our school

models rely on a range of approaches designed to meet the specific needs of students and families in their communities. But all schools in our portfolio are committed to three design principles: They focus on an expanded definition of student success. They are committed to equity, holding high expectations for all students and ensuring learning outcomes are not predictable by identity markers. And they put a premium on innovating to meet the needs of today's students.

Our portfolio gives us a front-row view of the range of schools that are supporting students to realize their full potential. For example, the Sojourner Truth School in Washington, DC, has developed a Montessori model for middle and high school students that combines rigorous academics with real-world learning. All students participate in public-facing "micro-economies" that involve real work and real money. For instance, middle school students run an urban farm. This includes cultivating the farm and engaging in the marketing, promotion and business management required for selling their produce.

As the team at Sojourner Truth puts it, they focus as much on personal development as academic development. Even during the difficult 2020–21 school year, Sojourner Truth students experienced strong academic growth in math and reading. At the same time, they demonstrated above-average development of skills like self-management and self-awareness. The school's student survey data show that Sojourner Truth has built a culture of rigorous expectations, along with a perception of fairness and school safety.

We need to measure whether students feel prepared to take their next step after high school.

Another example is Gem Prep in Nampa, Idaho, where nearly 70 percent of students are from low-income families. The school combines college-prep expectations with a focus on building mindsets and skills. As early as elementary school, students' learning is tailored so they can accelerate beyond grade level in some subjects while getting extra support in others. Seventh and eighth grade are designed as transition years that build kids' independence and ownership of their learning.

In high school, all students take college courses and graduate with associate degrees, along with a clear sense of the career paths they want to explore. In the challenging 2020–21 school year, nearly 70 percent of Gem Prep students outpaced national norms for academic growth, and nearly 80 percent demonstrated an above-average growth mindset.

Schools like Sojourner Truth and Gem Prep shine a light on what is possible when educators and families work together to develop new school models where every young person can feel safe, loved and supported to realize their full potential.

Measurement and accountability. The Every Student Succeeds Act, signed into law in 2015, requires every state to measure academic performance in reading, math and science. Measuring academic results is key to understanding where progress is needed across states, districts and student demographic groups. But existing report cards provide an incomplete picture of whether students are ready to pursue their post-secondary goals and thrive as adults.

We need to expand what we measure to include social-emotional competencies and whether students feel prepared to take their next step after high school. These measures shouldn't yet be included in the federal accountability system. Measuring SEL is still an emergent field, relying on surveys to understand students' perceptions of their social-emotional development and their experiences of their school culture and climate. But these data reveal

insights about students' experiences and how they might vary by grade level, gender, race and ethnicity and English proficiency or ability.

These comparisons can be powerful tools for ensuring that all students, no matter their background, have a positive school experience centered on their academic and social-emotional development. The data can also be correlated to academic results to identify strategies for improving academic outcomes. An expanded set of measures can be used as a tool for equity and continuous improvement.

This work is already taking place in schools across the country. For example, the California CORE districts, a group of eight districts that came together to apply for Race to the Top federal funding and have continued to collaborate on school improvement efforts since then, have developed the CORE Data Collaborative. This collaborative helps member districts adopt new measures focused on high school readiness, students' social-emotional skills and school climate measures, among other factors. These comprehensive measures enable districts to focus on continuous improvement, innovation and collaboration to ensure all students are on a pathway to success.

Human capital. The challenge with educational innovation is that it often requires more work from teachers. To deliver on an expanded definition of student success, educators must have a deep belief in their students and high expectations for what they can accomplish. It requires them to adopt new approaches to how they teach, infusing SEL into their academic lessons and supporting students to define their long-term goals and plans. With 45 percent of public schools reporting that they have at least one teacher vacancy, it will be impossible to broaden the definition of student success unless we rethink teacher roles, school staffing structures, training, certification requirements and compensation models.

We should design school staffing to respond to the question: "What is the range of expe-

riences that students need to thrive?" Then we should consider what roles teachers, instructional support staff, student teachers, tutors, parents and members of the community can play in delivering on this vision.

Many caring adults with different experiences and expertise can power student learning, and several nonprofits have emerged to show us how to get there. For example, the Public Impact initiative Opportunity Culture helps school districts extend the reach of high-quality teachers within existing school budgets. Parent empowerment organizations such as Springboard Collaborative and the Oakland Reach train caregivers to support student learning from home.

These and other innovative approaches can help every student get access to the learning they need to thrive. Alongside these new models, we need an array of policy changes to certification requirements, teacher-student ratios and limits on the roles non-teachers can play in a classroom. We also need a new approach to education funding that allows schools to reallocate teacher salary dollars to cover new innovative positions.

Conclusion

Now is the time to develop a new definition of student success that moves beyond a sole focus on academics to ensure young people are supported to realize their full potential. Students must leave high school prepared to realize the aspirations they have for themselves and participate fully in society. They must graduate with a strong academic foundation, social-emotional competencies, an integrated identity and a clear plan of action.

While we are far from delivering on this promise today, many schools are already piloting and implementing new approaches to deliver on an expanded definition of student success. We have the knowledge and know-how to make the shift, and future generations need us to rise to the challenge.

'THE ARMY WE HAVE': ASKING TEACHERS TO DO FEWER THINGS BETTER

Robert Pondiscio and Jessica Schurz

When Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was visiting US troops headed to Iraq in 2004, a soldier asked why his unit had to weld scrap metal from trash heaps onto old Humvees to strengthen them against attacks. Rumsfeld memorably responded, "You go to war with the army you have, not the army you might want or wish to have at a later time."

Teaching isn't combat, though education is often discussed using military metaphors. Teachers are often said to be "on the front lines" or "in the trenches." But there's a lesson in Rumsfeld's simple truth that can and should be applied to education: you go to school with the teachers you have, not the teachers you might wish you had.

Education policymakers and practitioners have been stubbornly reluctant to grasp this truth or adapt their battle plans to the realities of classroom life, student readiness or the changing labor market.

For decades, education policy has been built on an unshakable faith that the way to raise student outcomes is to improve teacher quality, whether through providing training and certification, unlocking excellence through incentives or luring white-collar professionals away from more remunerative careers through some combination of higher pay or enhanced prestige.

'You go to war with the army you have, not the army you might want or wish to have.'

None of these strategies have been fruitful at scale, nor are they likely to be effective in the future.

The inconvenient fact is that America's public schools need nearly 3.2 million people to teach their students. Any number that large means the men and women who staff our schools and teach our children will be, by definition, ordinary people. There will never be a sufficient number of classroom saints and superstars to go around, nor sufficient hours in the day to meet the ever-spiraling demands we place on teachers to fulfill multiple roles, from instructional designer and deliverer to unlicensed therapist attempting to reach and teach the "whole child."

We have known for several decades that some teachers are more effective than others. But identifying what makes them so has proved elusive. No consistent or clear relationship has been found, for example, between teacher credentialing or certification exams and classroom effectiveness. High-profile "alternative

certification” programs like Teach for America have attempted to lure the “best and the brightest” graduates of elite universities to spend at least a few years in the classroom, with mixed results for students.

But even if these programs produced stellar results, they account for only a small fraction of the nation’s teachers, more than 80 percent of whom enter the classroom via traditional routes. The dominant education reform playbook of testing and accountability rests on the notion that teachers know what to do and that the only role for policy is to set standards and measure performance, driving out laggards and rewarding stellar performers with merit pay or promotions. But simply paying teachers more is unlikely to make the profession more attractive to highly educated workers than engineering, medicine or law, whose numbers combined are less than the number of active teachers in American classrooms, both public and private.

In sum, there is a conceptual problem at the heart of our decades-long effort to improve teacher performance. We are seeking to raise and enhance the capacities of millions of teachers while placing ever greater burdens on them. If this approach was going to be successful, we’d have evidence of it by now. If achievable, sustainable progress is our aim, we should endeavor instead to make the job one that can be done with a reasonable degree of success by the teachers we have, not the teachers we wish we had.

The churn of reform

Despite the size of the field—well over three million public school teachers and 300,000 new hires each year—the teaching profession never quite adjusted to seismic changes in the labor market that gained momentum in the final decades of the last century. For much of its history, American teaching relied almost exclusively on readily available and comparatively inexpensive female labor: women who made teaching their careers for the majority of their

In response to this constant churn, teachers are growing increasingly weary.

professional lives. By the 1960s, over half of college-educated women in the workforce were teachers. In the decades since, women have flooded into the broader labor market, entering fields that were previously male dominated. We are left with well-meaning professionals in a sorely outdated model. Teacher shortages and quality remain stubbornly endemic.

Layered like sediment on top of this model has come reform upon reform, year after year, at the federal, state and district level, in what two professors of education called “staccato succession.” Take, for example, Florida’s Student Success Act of 2011. The governor signed into law several optimistic reforms aimed at improving how teachers were paid and retained by instituting teacher evaluations, with the majority of a teacher’s score based on improved student test results. In just six years, the number of states that required data on student improvement in teacher evaluations increased from 15 to 43.

Now, the pendulum seems to be swinging the other way. A report by the National Council on Teacher Quality showed that 30 states have walked back one or more teacher-evaluation reforms. These loosened requirements received mixed reviews. While many union leaders support the reversal, the report claimed that “it is hard to attribute many of these changes to anything other than a desire to revert to the status quo.” This suggests a stubborn belief that teachers simply lack the will—not the capacity—to do more.

Not only are reforms staccato, but they are also often too amorphous to be meaningful. In 2008, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education published a requirement for teachers to “develop knowledge of diversity in

the United States and the world” and to develop “professional dispositions that respect and value differences, and skills for working with diverse populations.” However well-intentioned, these criteria are too vague and malleable to drive improvement. What exactly does it look like for a teacher to be committed to “social justice” for her students? With nothing clearly defined, requirements of this kind just lead to impossible demands heaped on teachers.

In response to this constant churn, teachers are growing increasingly weary. “You have to know the new math program, the new reading standards, the new science standards, on top of that there’s been a kind of revolution going on with technology. . . . There’s no getting out of it,” said a reading specialist teacher from an elementary school in Pennsylvania. “I’ve got a new schedule every year,” complained a middle school teacher from Connecticut. “We are a little overwhelmed,” noted a math teacher from Texas.

More than two-thirds of teachers surveyed in 2017 described the education reforms imposed on them in recent years as “too much” or “way too much.” More than four in five agreed that many reforms change as soon as they get a handle on them. “I see many initiatives rise and fall,” noted an algebra teacher. “I’ve been here 20 years and I swear there have been 20 different initiatives in curriculum.” Faced with the choice of keeping up with the reform bloat or exiting the teaching profession altogether, it’s perhaps no surprise that many teachers choose the latter.

‘Choose your own curriculum adventure’

One of the most burdensome challenges teachers face is lesson planning and the prodigious amount of time required to create materials from scratch, curate lessons found on the internet or customize curriculum provided by school districts. “Few teachers ever take coursework on instructional design and, therefore, have little knowledge of the role it plays in student

One way to improve teacher effectiveness would be to reduce the burden of lesson planning.

learning,” notes Marcy Stein, a retired education professor at the University of Washington Tacoma with expertise in evaluating instructional design. “Even if teachers were taught about instructional design, they would likely not have the time to prepare instructional materials, field test those materials to determine if they are effective and modify the materials before using them to teach students.”

One way to improve teacher effectiveness would be to reduce the burden of lesson planning, which is extremely time-consuming and distracts teachers from higher-yielding uses of their time and energy. A 2016 study by the RAND Corporation revealed that virtually every English teacher in America—99 percent of elementary school teachers and 96 percent of secondary school teachers—draws on “materials they developed or selected themselves.” Among elementary school teachers, 94 percent report turning to Google to find English language arts lesson plans and instructional materials; 87 percent search Pinterest.

The numbers are virtually the same for math. Survey data by the research firm MDR found that teachers spend seven hours per week searching for instructional resources and another five hours per week creating their own classroom materials. Scouring the internet for materials or creating them from scratch is a woefully inefficient use of teacher time and effort, but we accept it as not merely standard practice but a best practice.

One of us—Robert Pondiscio—recently spent a year embedded at a Success Academy charter

school in the South Bronx, in the same neighborhood where he was a fifth grade teacher in a New York City public school years earlier. Success Academy is an exceptionally high-performing charter school network, and its approach to curricula and lesson planning is a model alternative to the prevailing approach.

At Success, lesson planning was conceived as “intellectual preparation” for instruction, not lesson creation. The change in how teachers spend their time—and the effect on student outcomes—seemed profound. Time that in other settings might have been spent writing lessons from scratch or culling them from the internet was devoted instead to building subject matter expertise, anticipating student misunderstanding and practicing lesson delivery. And this in turn led to observably richer classroom conversation, thoughtful questioning strategies and more meaningful feedback on student work and thinking.

The existence of an established curriculum developed by network staff changed the teacher’s job from instructional designer to instructional deliverer. While some argue, often strenuously, that “teacher autonomy” is sacrosanct, the stronger argument is that the availability of existing curricula frees up teacher time for studying student work, providing feedback, building relationships with parents and engaging in other higher-yield activities than lesson creation or customization.

In contrast, the common expectation that teachers develop their own curriculum suggests not just a lack of appreciation for the complicated nature of instructional design but also a poor grasp of the importance of a coherent, knowledge-rich curriculum to student achievement. Researchers Morgan Polikoff and Jennifer Dean aptly called prevailing practice “the supplemental curriculum bazaar.” In a 2019 report, they analyzed more than 300 of the most downloaded supplemental teaching materials, finding that the majority were “mediocre” or “probably not worth using.” The standard practice of curriculum curation and customization not

Ask instead what *only* a teacher can do. Everything else must be a job for someone else.

only robs teachers of unrecoverable time but also robs students of the opportunity to engage with rich and rigorous materials.

“The available research suggests there are two particularly powerful levers that districts can use to improve student achievement,” notes education reformer Dylan Wiliam. “The first is to ensure that the curriculum, including whatever textbooks are adopted, is one that is explicitly focused on developing knowledge, because the amount of knowledge in long-term memory determines a student’s ability to think.” The second lever, he says, “is to establish, within the district, a culture where all teachers improve, not because they are not good enough, but because they can be even better.”

These two levers could work in concert if professional development for teachers focused primarily on the curriculum they were using. In fact, professional development tends to focus on non-curriculum subjects and local initiatives du jour.

Even the best curriculum does not teach itself, however. Nor should it be assumed that improving teacher performance and reducing or focusing teachers’ workload is a simple matter of curriculum adoption and training. David Steiner, professor of education at Johns Hopkins and the former state education commissioner of New York, wisely cautions that while excellent curricula are widely available, availability isn’t usage. Steiner has written persuasively that American education “not only fails to support the sustained use of demanding curriculum—but actively produces powerful disincentives to its use.”

Chief among those disincentives is a professional culture that suggests to teachers at every turn that they alone are in a position to know and understand what will engage their students and what kids need to learn and grow. This may be flattering to teachers, but the price of that flattery is to make their jobs untenable. If every aspect of classroom teaching is something that only an individual teacher is in a position to know and do, they will inevitably do too many things and none of them well. No wonder teacher burnout and low achievement have become the norm.

In his 2016 book *Leadership for Teacher Learning*, Wiliam observed that when teachers are asked to identify something they will stop doing or do less of to create time and space to explore improvements to their teaching, they fail miserably. This makes restructuring the teacher's

role a job for education leadership and policy-makers, not individual teachers. The onus is not on the soldier to make "the army we have" a more effective fighting force.

Something's got to give. It is irrational to expect teachers—people of average capacity and sentience owing to the sheer numbers of them—to be expert in both instructional delivery and instructional design. Each is a heavy lift. To demand both is akin to demanding that an actor or musician also write plays and symphonies with no negative effect on his or her performance.

The onus is on education leaders, policy-makers and theorists to stop asking what more teachers can do. Ask instead what *only* a teacher can do. Everything else must be a job for someone else.

ANCHORING K-12 EDUCATION IN 21ST-CENTURY FOUNDATIONAL SKILLS

Matt Sigelman

More students are graduating from high school today than ever before, but persistent skills gaps hold many back from moving on successfully to fulfilling careers. For public education to fulfill its mandate as a path to opportunity, it must redouble its efforts to close these gaps.

What are the skills required for 21st-century work, and how can we ensure that every high school graduate has mastered them? While technical skills can help learners launch into specific careers, the skills needed most are more fundamental and far-reaching.

Today, work requires more than just mastering the “three R’s.” A new set of foundational skills are increasingly important across industries and careers, and they are essential for every graduate, whether college bound or heading directly to work, whether enrolled in a so-called academic track or a career technical education program. These new foundational skills must be incorporated in all primary and secondary school curricula.

Recent research by the Burning Glass Institute and the Boston Consulting Group finds that 37 percent of the top skills required in the average US occupation have been replaced over the past five years. While many of these new skills are technical in nature, there has also been considerable blending of technical and foundational

Today, work requires more than just the ‘three R’s.’

knowledge. Indeed, studies suggest that the best-paid and fastest-growing jobs are those that combine core skills such as empathy, cooperation and negotiation with mathematical and analytic skills.

This should not surprise us. Skills evolve, and over time those once considered the exclusive domain of experts become the foundations of the future. Methods pioneered by epidemiologists decades ago are now the stuff of routine middle school fieldwork, while the advanced medical procedures of the 1970s—blood sugar monitoring or colorectal cancer screening—are now considered so fundamental that they can be done at home by patients themselves.

Looking ahead, we can expect skills in fields like machine learning and the cloud that now seem on the cutting edge of technological innovation will eventually become routine workplace tools. This continual spread and cross-pollination of skills compel us to revisit assumptions about what is foundational.

What are the new foundational skills?

To identify the new foundational skills, Burning Glass and the Business Higher Education Forum analyzed more than 150 million job postings to find skills required across an array of jobs that pay good wages and offer strong opportunities for economic mobility. We also studied the career histories of more than 50 million workers to understand which skills prove most effective in helping people enter careers and rise over time.

What we found was that the portfolio of fundamental skills has grown significantly. In addition to the core skills long considered the bedrock of American education, workers today need digital skills and even business skills, regardless of their career fields. We know these skills matter to employers because they call for

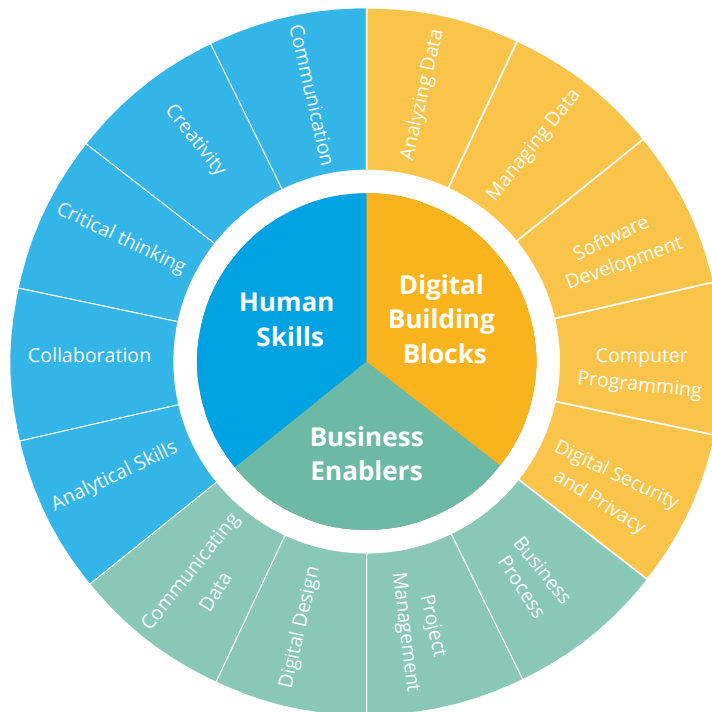
them disproportionately in job postings, and we know they matter for careers because they are those most likely to be cited in the resumes and social profiles of workers who climb the career ladder.

We use three categories—human skills, digital building block skills and business-enabling skills—to understand the 14 new foundational skills we identified.

Human skills. Human skills are closely related to what are sometimes called “soft skills,” including critical thinking, creativity, communication, analytical skills, collaboration and relationship building.

Digital building block skills. Digital building block skills are technical skills—particularly data skills—that are now required well beyond

Figure 1. The new foundational skills



Source: *The View from the Schoolhouse: How Middle School and High School Educators See the Skills Shaping the Modern Economy*, Burning Glass Technologies and American Student Assistance, October 2020.

traditional digital occupations. A growing number of so-called “middle-skill” jobs—those that require more than a high school diploma but less than a four-year college degree—call for data-driven decision-making. Data analysis, data management, software development, computer programming and skills to ensure digital privacy and security have become increasingly important.

Business-enabler skills. Business-enabler skills, which help workers use their other skills in practical situations, include project management, business process, data communication and digital design.

How important are the new foundational skills?

The new foundational skills are already sought for the majority of jobs across the economy. In 2019, 62 percent of job postings called for at least one of them, up from 53 percent just two years earlier. Nine of the 14 foundational skills each unlock at least two million jobs per year. And workers who have digital building block or business-enabling skills command salary premiums of between 11 and 39 percent.

Importantly, the new foundational skills aren’t just relevant for the college bound. They are even more powerful in creating opportunity for those without a college degree. Of the 21 million job postings that mention a foundational skill in 2019, more than half were for occupations that don’t require a college degree. And high-school-level jobs offered the greatest salary premiums for these competencies. For example, high-school-level jobs that require just one digital building block skill pay a 39 percent premium, double the increase seen in bachelor’s degree-level jobs.

Given the nature of the new foundational skills, it would be logical to assume that their relevance is limited to the digital economy. In fact, nine out of 14 are in higher demand in jobs outside of STEM occupations.

It’s not either-or. The new foundational skills enable learners to acquire domain-specific knowledge.

Some purists may perceive incorporating these skills in the classroom as an unwelcome shift toward vocational education. These zero-sum thinkers assume that attention for one set of skills necessarily detracts attention from others, and they frame the interplay of workplace and academic skills as an either-or choice. In reality, it’s both-and. The new foundational skills reinforce and amplify domain-specific knowledge and technical capabilities. They enable workers to acquire, exercise and leverage technical skills.

Take project management. Although once required primarily for business-related jobs, project management is increasingly critical for a widening array of careers. For example, today, in addition to clinical duties, nurses must also coordinate patient care across multiple providers. Health care and IT jobs are different in myriad ways, but both nurses and IT managers must be able to plan tasks and coordinate with others. While IT project managers need to learn specific approaches to project management and are expected to be conversant with particular project management software platforms, to use these tools, IT project managers need the same core competencies as nurse project managers.

Even more fundamental and important across industries, the new foundational skills enable workers to acquire new skills. A technical skill may become obsolete over time, but someone with strong mastery of the new foundational skills will find it relatively easy to replace. The new foundational skills do more than help students launch careers. They bear fruit though the

learner's working life, offering not just an initial leg up but also increasing value over time.

When most people hear the word “foundational,” they imagine something necessary but not defining. The foundation supports the building, but the essence of the building is what rises above. That's not how the new foundational skills work. On the contrary, they increasingly define what a worker does over the arc of their career.

Senior jobs are 49 percent more likely than entry-level jobs to require any kind of new foundational skill, 152 percent more likely to require business-enabling skills, 44 percent more likely to require human skills and 33 percent more likely to require digital building blocks. Similarly, workers with capabilities from across the three categories enjoy greater upward mobility. Technical skills may play a significant role in helping students get on a career ladder, but the new foundational skills are what will help them climb.

The new foundational skills also protect workers against automation. This is particularly true in so-called “hybrid” jobs, which require a combination of skills—perhaps a mix of business and data skills, as might be required of a marketing analyst, or a mix of design and software development skills, as might be essential for a user experience designer.

Jobs that rely heavily on tech and data skills are more likely than others to be robot-proof. Only 12 percent of hybrid jobs are likely to be vulnerable to automation, compared to 42 percent overall. That's because those who drive technology, instead of being driven by it, must have strong judgment, critical thinking and communication skills—not surprisingly, perhaps, the most uniquely and irreplaceably human skills. In a world that is rapidly embracing automation, those who have mastered the new foundational skills are less likely to be displaced and, in the event they lose their jobs, will be better able to reposition themselves for new careers.

Teaching foundational skills

Despite the clear case for grounding curricula in the new foundational skills, data from the schoolhouse and the labor market indicate that we have much work to do.

A Burning Glass analysis of the resumes of 56 million workers found that 60 percent listed fewer than three foundational skills, and 22 percent listed none at all. Digital security and communicating data, the new foundational skills experiencing the fastest growth in demand, showed up in just 7 percent and 2 percent of resumes, respectively. And none of the new foundational skills is mentioned in more than one-quarter of resumes.

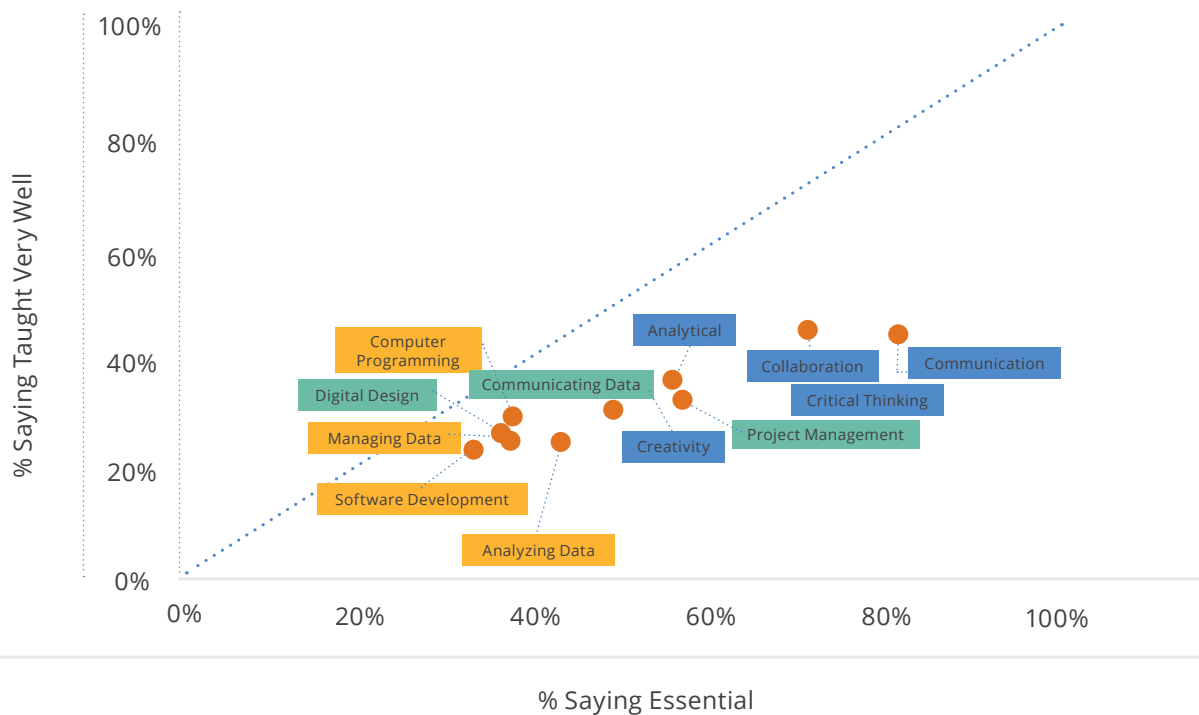
This is not definitive evidence of mismatch; a job seeker may not list a skill on her resume if she doesn't realize it has value. But this level of disparity between supply and demand far exceeds what we would typically expect, and it suggests a market shortage.

K–12 teachers recognize the importance of the new foundational skills, but they report they lack the opportunities and resources to teach them. In a large-scale survey conducted by Burning Glass and American Student Assistance, each of the new foundational skill categories was ranked as essential by at least half of teachers—and 92 percent recognized them as either essential or somewhat important.

Yet fewer than half the teachers surveyed said that any of the new foundational skills was being taught well at their school. Communication skills fared the best, taught well according to 46 percent of teachers, and software development

Many K–12 teachers recognize the importance of foundational skills but lack the resources to teach them.

Figure 2. The new foundational skill instructional gap



Source: *The View from the Schoolhouse: How Middle School and High School Educators See the Skills Shaping the Modern Economy*, Burning Glass Technologies and American Student Assistance, October 2020.

skills fared the worst, with just 25 percent reporting they are taught well.

The gap between the share of teachers indicating that a skill is essential and the share reporting that the skill is taught well at their school—what I call an instructional gap—is dramatically wider in schools where the majority of students are Black or Hispanic.

Faculties at majority-non-white schools rate the importance of the new foundational skills higher than their peers at majority-white schools, but they also express greater pessimism about what kind of instruction their school can provide. For example, the instructional gap for software development skills is 16 percent in majority-white schools but close to 60 percent in majority-Black schools. With career success today so dependent on mastery of these skills, this divide risks widening already prevalent racial disparities.

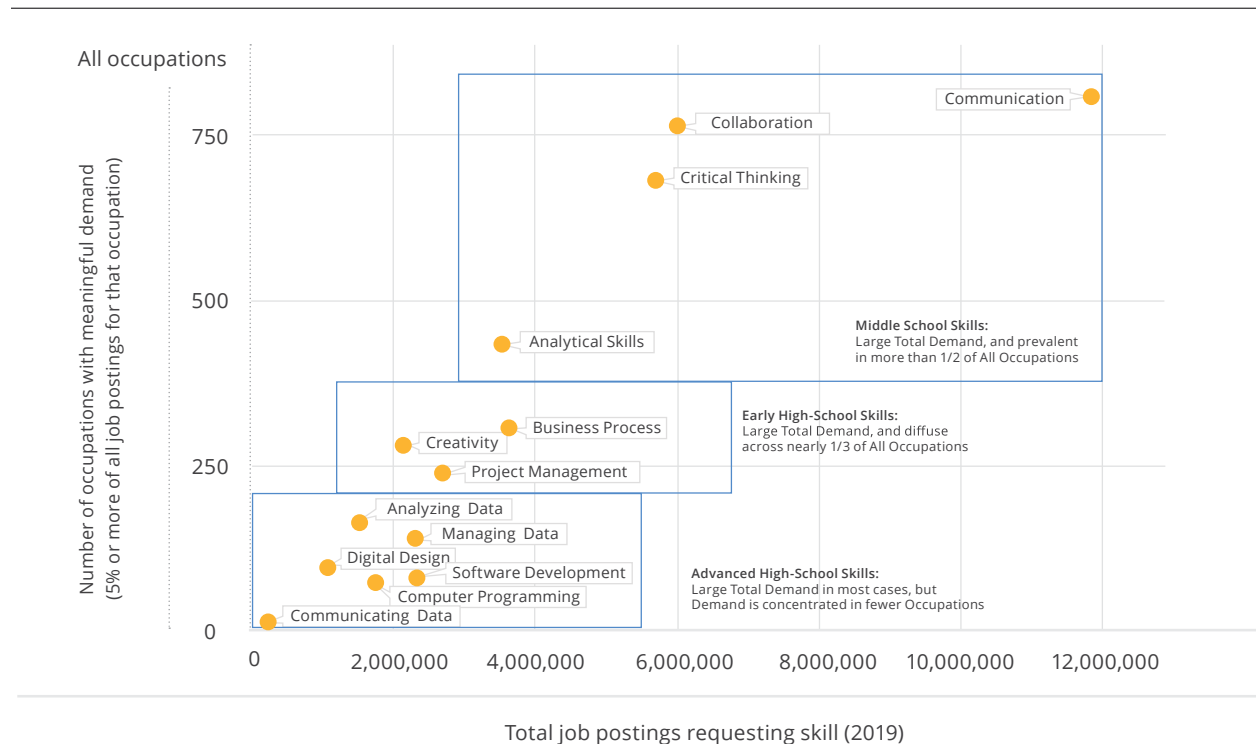
How can we close the gap and ensure that every graduate has mastery of the new foundational skills?

First, we must integrate the new foundational skills into curricula, making them central to all studies, not just a supplement. School systems will need new teaching frameworks along with standards and assessments. Teachers will need professional development.

Second, we must determine when and how to introduce each skill—at what grade level and in connection with what other subjects. One way to make these decisions starts with a hierarchy of skills: which are in most demand and relevant to the greatest number of careers. Students should start early in mastering skills with the broadest applicability and greatest demand, leaving for later study those that are more specific to particular corners of the labor market.

Instruction in the new foundational skills

Figure 3. A model for when to introduce the new foundational skills



Source: *The View from the Schoolhouse: How Middle School and High School Educators See the Skills Shaping the Modern Economy*, Burning Glass Technologies and American Student Assistance, October 2020.

may start in the classroom, but it should be reinforced through experiential learning. A full 95 percent of teachers who responded to the Burning Glass–American Student Assistance survey indicated that students who have opportunities for experiential learning stand a better chance of acquiring human skills; 88 and 89 percent said the same about digital building blocks and business enablers respectively.

Few would disagree that students should graduate with the skills they need to succeed in the modern world. The good news is we know what those skills are. As the economy evolves and work becomes increasingly sophisticated, the range of capabilities that could be described

as fundamental is widening. A combination of human skills, digital building blocks and business enablers works together to unlock opportunity, drive mobility and build equity.

Will we teach them? Restructuring curricula can be a painful and often political exercise. School systems willing to rise to the challenge and integrate the new foundational skills in both classroom instruction and experiential learning won't just be preparing students for good jobs; they will be equipping young people with the tools to adapt in times of change, redefine themselves and achieve fulfillment over the long arc of their careers.

CAREER PATHWAYS' AMERICAN MOMENT

Paul Herdman

Young people in the US face a complex and evolving world. They have grown up through a global pandemic, major climate shifts and significant social unrest. Our schools and employers are responding by reimagining the path to adulthood—a once-in-a-century transformation of how we launch young people into the world. Although this effort, often called “career pathways,” can help connect young people to good jobs, it’s also bigger than that: it’s about helping them figure out where they fit and how to make informed choices about their futures so that they become thriving adults.

We’ve seen this kind of change before. In 1910, just 7 percent of Americans had a high school diploma. By 1940, the figure was approaching 70 percent. The package of reforms that made the difference was known as the “high school movement,” which made high school a public good, readily available and open to all. In an era when secondary education was generally reserved for the elite, the US created the best-educated workforce in the world and kept that lead for much of the 20th century.

Today, many countries have caught up or passed us, and the gap between rich and poor is growing. We need to level the playing field and improve our game. By 2027, economists project that 70 percent of family-sustaining US careers will require a degree or certification beyond

We need to do more to meld the worlds of school and work.

high school. In essence, the bar has been raised from 12 years of education in the 20th century to closer to 14 in the 21st.

What’s needed starts with more schooling, but we also need to do more to meld the worlds of school and work and give young people more agency over what, where, how and when they learn. This is the essence of career pathways, and if done right, it can be a historic shift.

The US is in the midst of what the education nonprofit Jobs for the Future calls a “big blur” between school and work. It looks different in every state, but growing numbers of high school students are gaining meaningful work experience through internships or job shadowing and completing college coursework or certifications before they turn 18. These work-and-learn pathways are often aligned with growing industries like health care or IT. In some ways, they resemble traditional vocational education, but they are also different because the new pathways are meant for all kids, regardless of what they plan to do after high school. The intention is not to

lock young people into a career choice at age 14 but rather to help them make better decisions about their futures by exposing them to the world of work and giving them a start on training they may need when they graduate.

The opportunity looks different for every learner. For one Delaware student, pathways meant following his passion for tech, becoming a certified Cisco systems technician and getting consulting gigs while in high school. For another, it meant working on the school's farm in an agriscience pathway and producing food for the school culinary program. His goal in college was not to learn farming, but rather to study how farming affects climate change. For a student working in a hospitality pathway, interning at a local hotel was a way to improve her people skills before heading to medical school. Pathways are a customizable vehicle to help young people get a leg up on their futures and make better career choices.

The push to connect high school students to the world of work is happening all over the country, in red states and blue. In Delaware, the pathways movement has grown from 27 students in 2015 to 26,000 in 2022, more than 60 percent of the state's high schoolers. From Texas to Tennessee and California to Louisiana, we're seeing similar interest and a range of strategies from job shadowing to apprenticeships, all intended to close the gap between education and employment. In our polarized political world, this is a rare island of bipartisan collaboration.

What's driving this rapid growth?

Career and technical education isn't new, but the career pathways movement has been gaining steam for a decade or so. Two influential 2010 reports by the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development, *Learning for Jobs* and *Off to a Good Start? Jobs for Youth*, revealed that students in countries like Switzerland and Germany with strong vocational education and training were transitioning to careers more seamlessly than their peers in

Pathways are easy to explain.

The value proposition is clear and concrete.

other countries. In 2011 Robert Schwartz and his colleagues at the Harvard Graduate School of Education produced a groundbreaking report, *Pathways to Prosperity*, challenging the notion of "college for all." In 2012, Schwartz partnered with Jobs for the Future to launch a Pathways to Prosperity state network that enabled states interested in the new approach, including Delaware, to expand their thinking and learn from each other.

What's driving this rapid growth? Unlike some other education reforms, such as raising academic standards or improving the measurement of student achievement, pathways are easy to explain. The value proposition is clear and concrete. They deliver a direct benefit for students, and they work, driving better educational and career outcomes.

Parents want their kids to "launch" successfully and find a fulfilling career that generates family-sustaining wages. College is expensive; dropping out with debt can set students back for decades. Pathways not only enable young people to earn up to a year's worth of college credit or a nationally recognized credential; students also learn through work and can explore a profession before committing.

High school, particularly senior year, can be a boring grind, and many students would rather spend that year exploring a potential career, especially if they can also earn college credit or a certification or draw a paycheck while pursuing their education. Engaging young people in meaningful work can also help address the complaint often heard from employers that young people lack what America Achieves calls "durable skills," such as working with others, listening and communicating. Pathways give young

A four-year degree, while still valuable, is increasingly just one route among many.

people a head start on school, a chance to learn essential skills and an opportunity to start thinking about what they want from a career.

Pathways make good business sense, too. In today's tight labor market, employers are eager to find and keep good people, and building relationships with students can help create a stronger, more inclusive talent pipeline. European scholars studying apprenticeships have found that some employers are initially concerned that young people hired in their teens know nothing about the business and contribute little. But over time, the same employers came to recognize that their investment was paying off with increased retention, reduced retraining costs and a stronger company culture.

The pandemic sharply accelerated the pathways approach. Covid-19 exacerbated existing inequities as soaring unemployment hurt youth more than adults, and women and young people of color fared worse than their white male counterparts. Young Americans, many of them still feeling the impact of the economic collapse of 2009, saw unemployment double from 10 percent in 2019 to roughly 20 percent in 2021. This unprecedented crisis galvanized the public and private sectors, underscoring the need to get young people trained and into good jobs. Billions of federal recovery dollars were invested in workforce training, and private foundations gave millions more to strengthen work-based learning.

Technology is changing. New jobs are emerging, and employers need new sources of talent. Even before the "Big Quit," baby boomers were retiring more rapidly than new employees could replace them. With a smaller pool of potential candidates and unemployment rates

below 4 percent nationally, employers are working harder to engage a more inclusive talent pipeline. Companies are partnering with high schools and colleges to open early college high schools and launching apprenticeship programs in industries such as IT and education. Still other firms have expanded their search for talent to groups once on the sidelines, including neurodiverse individuals or the formerly incarcerated.

The path to success is also changing, and there are many more options than in the past. A four-year degree, while still valuable, is increasingly just one route among many. There's growing demand for so-called "middle-skill" jobs that require more than a high school education but less than a four-year college degree—jobs in fields like health care and advanced manufacturing that often pay well and offer strong opportunities for growth.

Many employers are less concerned about how long a candidate has studied than about what he or she knows how to do. Credential Engine reports that there are more than 950,000 credentials—degrees, academic certificates, third-party certifications, licenses, badges and other awards—now available to students. Many take less than a year to attain, and a good number are "stackable" as individuals move up their career ladder. For example, a high school student can become a certified nursing assistant, then generate an income while studying to become a physician's assistant.

Incentives for high schools are also changing. Parents and students want policymakers to make it easier for students to attain postsecondary training before they complete 12th grade. From 2003 to 2011, the percentage of high school graduates completing a college-level course increased 68 percent. As of 2021, the Education Commission of the States reports that 70 percent of all US school districts offer "dual enrollment" in high school and college, and state legislatures are debating some 200 bills to expand high schoolers' access to postsecondary training. In Delaware, pathways are now the largest provider of dual enrollment credit.

It's rare to see institutional incentives align with what's good for kids, but that's what appears to be happening.

Potential pitfalls

As with any good idea, there are potential pitfalls. First, if we're not careful, pathways can exacerbate socioeconomic gaps. Strong guidance, good data systems and clear accountability are needed so students of color and low-income students don't end up disproportionately in lower-skill, lower-wage pathways.

Second, some students may need help to get to in-person classes or work-based learning opportunities. Although digital training is getting better, there's still a place for in-person learning, especially in hands-on technical fields. Transportation is often lacking in rural communities, but access can be a problem anywhere. Some students also need wraparound supports—from coaching and mentoring to housing assistance—to make the most of the opportunities available.

Some schools have addressed transportation problems by building training options—perhaps working farms or early learning centers—on-site. Others devote additional resources to counseling and provide wraparound supports at wellness centers. Access, broadly defined, is critical for equity.

Third, employers need help building capacity to accommodate high school students on-site at scale. Many employers are hesitant to hire high school students for liability reasons; others have scant workplace experience with this age group. Nonprofit organizations and other intermediaries can help connect the dots between employers and schools.

What's important is that employers understand that engaging young people in the world of work isn't just doing good. It's essential for their businesses—the best way to build the talent pipelines of the future. It's a job for the human resources division of the business, not the community relations arm. And regional

employers must come together in industry councils that work with educators to codesign technical course content, build relationships with job candidates and craft stronger data systems so that investments are translated into sound training and good jobs.

How can policy help us make the most of this moment?

Policymakers can help by coordinating across agencies and party lines. This is one of the few issues about which Republicans and Democrats can agree. At the state and federal levels, the Departments of Labor, Education, Health and Human Services and Commerce can support practitioners by coordinating strategy, aligning on data, and consolidating the guidance they offer. The Biden administration seemed to prioritize collaboration of this kind in its FY23 budget, but there's more to be done.

Policymakers and philanthropists can help us all think big by setting ambitious goals—North Stars for the nation. What would it take, for example, to increase apprenticeships fivefold? Today there are just shy of 600,000 registered apprentices in the US. The Urban Institute's Robert Lerman notes that if we could create as many apprenticeships as a share of our labor force as Britain, Australia and Canada have, that number would climb to around four million. We should also build more bridges to learn from other countries that are doing this well and can help us accelerate our learning.

We must also rethink federal investment to better reflect the needs of students and employers. Despite strong evidence that many good jobs do not require a four-year degree and that only about one-third of Americans attain a bachelor's degree, federal funding favors bachelor's degree attainment seven to one over other types of postsecondary education and training.

In 2016, according to Will Marshall of the Progressive Policy Institute, Washington spent more than \$139 billion on postsecondary education, including loans, grants and other financial

aid for students. Of that, just \$19 billion went toward occupational education and training. Shifting this balance toward occupational education would level the playing field for high school students and provide a lifeline for millions of mid-career adults looking to reskill or upskill to keep up with the changing economy.

There is also much to be done at the state level by employers, educators, advocates and policymakers.

Start earlier. No one thinks we should be asking 14-year-olds to choose a life path, but that's not too soon to start exploring potential careers. Ninth grade can be too late if a child doesn't choose a high school with the courses they need to pursue their career interests.

Middle schoolers can begin by learning interpersonal workplace skills, expanding their thinking of what's possible and exploring how their educational decisions link to their imagined futures. It's hard to aspire to what you don't know exists.

Make it simpler. Many students struggle to navigate the education system and attain the training they need. It can be hard to find appropriate secondary and postsecondary programs and difficult to transfer among institutions. Student-to-counselor ratios are often several hundred to one.

What's needed is more customized support and information on scholarships, course offerings and career paths—information easily accessible to counselors and students alike. Also essential is equity of work-based learning placements, starting with paid internships for young people who can't afford to volunteer their time to get trained.

Engage business in co-ownership and design. Without employer engagement, pathways will fade away. Philanthropy is inherently fickle. Employers won't make sustained investments unless they promise real, tangible benefits for the company's bottom line. What's needed are

The US has many advantages to draw on as we work to catch up with international trends.

industry councils and partnerships that better connect employers and educators so this becomes part of the fabric of what we do.

An American opportunity

Employers and educators across America are waking up to the promise of career pathways, but we still lag behind many other countries in Europe and Asia. Switzerland, Germany and Singapore have more experience with earn-and-learn programs and have built enduring relationships with employers. More than half of Swiss students are enrolled in apprenticeship programs, and they can explore some 230 pathways.

But the US has many advantages to draw on as we work to catch up with international trends. We are a large, diverse country with a decentralized education system that generates new ideas. The Constitution pushes innovation down to the states, allowing us to leverage and learn from 50 state-level experiments. And our legislative history compels us to disaggregate data and design for equity based on income, race and ability, helping us improve the education we offer and provide it more fairly. What's needed now is a national conversation about how to marshal these advantages to reinvent our secondary and postsecondary education systems and provide all young people with a fair shot at a good life and a meaningful career.

A condensed version of this essay was published in September 2022 in The 74.

ESSAY AUTHORS

John Bailey is a fellow at the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative and a nonresident senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. He also serves as an adviser to the Walton Family Foundation. His previous positions include domestic policy adviser in the White House, deputy policy director to the US secretary of commerce and director of educational technology at the US Department of Education.

Derrell Bradford is the president of 50CAN and a senior visiting fellow at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. He was the founding board chair of EdBuild and currently leads the National Voices Fellowship.

Denise Forte is president and CEO at The Education Trust. Before Ed Trust, she was a senior fellow and director of public affairs for the Century Foundation. During the Obama administration, she served as principal deputy assistant secretary and acting assistant secretary in the Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development in the US Department of Education.

Paul Herdman is president and CEO of Rodel-Delaware and a founding member of Delaware's Vision Coalition. He is also an Aspen Institute–NewSchools fellow in entrepreneurial leadership. Before Rodel, he served as senior manager at New American Schools.

Tamar Jacoby is president of Opportunity America. A former journalist and author, she was a senior writer and justice editor at *Newsweek* and, before that, the deputy editor of the *New York Times* op-ed page. She is the author of *Someone Else's House: America's Unfinished Struggle for Integration* and editor of *This Way Up: New Thinking about Poverty and Economic Mobility*.

Robin Lake is director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education at Arizona State University. Her research focuses on US public school system reform, including public school choice and charter schools, portfolio management and state and local oversight practices.

Will Marshall is president and founder of the Progressive Policy Institute and a former member of the board of the Washington DC Public Charter Schools. His articles have appeared in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Los Angeles Times*, *The American Interest*, *The American Prospect* and *Democracy*, among other publications.

Frances Messano is the CEO of NewSchools Venture Fund. Her previous positions include vice president at Teach for America and associate partner at Monitor Institute.

Robert Pondiscio is a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. He was previously a New York City public school teacher and a journalist at *Time* and *BusinessWeek*. He is the author of *How the Other Half Learns: Equality, Excellence, and the Battle over School Choice*.

Keri Rodrigues is the founding president of the National Parents Union. A member of the US Department of Education's National Parent and Family Engagement Council, she worked previously at 1199SEIU and was elected to the Massachusetts Democratic State Committee.

Andrew Rotherham is a cofounder and partner at Bellwether, where he writes the blog and newsletter *Eduwonk.com*. Currently a member of the Virginia Board of Education, he served as special assistant to the president for domestic policy during the Clinton administration.

Ian Rowe is the founder and CEO of Vertex Partnership Academies and a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. Previous positions include CEO of Public Prep and deputy director of post-secondary success at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. He is the author of *Agency: The Four Point Plan for All Children to Overcome the Victimhood Narrative and Discover Their Pathway to Power*.

Jessica Schurz is program manager at the Hertog Foundation. She worked previously as a research assistant in the American Enterprise Institute's education department.

Matt Sigelman is president of the Burning Glass Institute, chairman of Lightcast and a visiting fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School's Center for Social Policy. He previously worked at McKinsey & Company and Capital One.



737 8th Street, SE

Suite 201

Washington, DC 20003

opportunityamericaonline.org