



# UNLOCKING THE FUTURE

Toward a new reform agenda  
for K–12 education

FEBRUARY 2023

# 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.

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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

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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

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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.

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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.

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