



A New Compact for Educational Excellence

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INTRODUCTION

America's public school students are drowning.

After nearly three decades of slow but steady increases in reading achievement, the scores of our fourth and eighth graders stagnated after 2015 and have fallen precipitously since 2019 for all but the highest performers.¹

Though the pandemic caused immediate and severe learning loss, reading scores have continued to erode even as the country passed the fifth anniversary of the COVID-19 shutdown. Nationally, as of 2024, fourth and eighth graders are back to where they started at the advent of the reading assessment.²

In simple terms, the share of fourth graders falling below the “basic” level of literacy has risen to 40%.³ Fewer than one-third of U.S. eighth graders can read at grade level.⁴ The picture is similarly bleak in math — stagnation just prior to the pandemic, followed by significant declines since, with the deepest drops among the lowest-performing students.⁵ The results in all grades and subjects show a widening gap between the highest and lowest performers, all while test scores remain below pre-pandemic levels,⁶ despite the Biden administration's infusion of \$190 billion in federal pandemic relief.⁷

These results from the National Assessment for Education Progress (NAEP), also known as the Nation's Report Card, spawned alarming headlines upon their release in January 2025: “American Children's Reading Skills Reach New Lows,” blasted the *New York Times*;⁸ “Kids' Reading and Math Skills Are Worsening, New Test Scores Reveal. What's Going On?” *USA Today* fretted.⁹ The dire data posed no mystery to the *Wall Street Journal's* editorial board, which summed up the situation bluntly: “America's Schools Keep Flunking.”¹⁰

American parents share the conclusion of the *Journal's* ed board about the state of public schooling. August 2024 public opinion polling from Gallup shows satisfaction with education remains among the lowest it has been this century, with three in ten parents somewhat or completely dissatisfied with their child's education and more than half of the wider public feeling the same.¹¹

A January 2025 Gallup survey about the general mood of the nation from two weeks before the recent NAEP release shows even lower satisfaction with public schools, with seven in ten respondents reporting dissatisfaction.¹²

Despite this crisis, the consensus that policymakers and advocates reached in the early 2000s about the importance and urgency of improving educational outcomes has long since disintegrated, torn apart by the social controversies that now dominate education rather than ideas about how to improve teaching and learning. Meanwhile, the Trump administration is attempting to eviscerate, if not shut down, the U.S. Department of Education and to redirect federal education spending from public to private schools.

Democrats opened the door to these attacks by abandoning the Clinton-Obama legacy of school reform and lining up behind teachers' unions defending the K-12 status quo. As a result, they've forfeited their party's historical advantage on educational issues. But if Democrats can no longer claim the mantle of the party of education, neither can Republicans, who have abdicated responsibility for the majority of the nation's schoolchildren by focusing on private school choice to the exclusion of nearly everything else.¹³ Ninety percent of American children attend public schools, and yet neither party is speaking to them or their families.¹⁴

The consequences for the country and our children of continued inaction are severe. "Looking at this data, it's clear that we're in enormous risk of losing an entire generation of learners unless we show some focus and leadership," Jane Swift, a former Republican governor of Massachusetts, told a reporter after the NAEP scores became public.¹⁵ In short, we've arrived at another "Nation at Risk" moment, but this time, U.S. political and business leaders aren't stepping forward to galvanize national action to fix our chronically

underperforming public schools. Senator Michael Bennet was pointed in a recent interview about the vacuum of national attention and leadership, stating, "...We've abandoned our aspirations for our kids when it comes to their education, period. We can't tolerate a system that creates the kind of outcomes we're seeing. ...We have a national interest in the fact that our reading scores are below where they were three decades ago. We have a national interest in the fact that our kids feel like the system we have — whether it's K-12, higher education, or workforce development — is not preparing them to succeed in this economy."¹⁶

We couldn't agree more. The country urgently needs a new vision that refocuses public schools on their core academic mission, ends the retreat from rigor and merit, increases opportunity for learners of all backgrounds, expands parental choice of public schools, closes achievement gaps, and moves to a post-bureaucratic system of autonomous and accountable public schools designed for today's children.

A NEW COMPACT FOR EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE

To reclaim the conversation from the political extremes and the interests that resist change in our legacy public schools, we propose a reform blueprint that creates a **new compact** with parents for public education and **reinvents the system** to make these goals possible. This vision is based on three fundamental principles:

- American public schools must **prepare children academically** to become successful adults and citizens.
- Families should have **a voice** in their child's education, including a choice within the public system to find a school that best fits their child's needs and aspirations.

- Though education is the province of the states, the United States government must protect the promise that every child will have access to a **quality public education**.

REBUILDING THE PROMISE OF PUBLIC EDUCATION

1. A goal of universal literacy by fourth grade; numeracy by eighth grade; and reading and math skills by graduation that enable students to succeed beyond high school.

One of the most basic responsibilities of any education system is to teach children to read, write, and do math.¹⁷ In a 2022 Gallup poll, parents identified a lack of focus on these basic subjects as among the top reasons for their dissatisfaction with public education.¹⁸ A Pew survey from 2023 found this perceived failure to teach the basics to be the runaway top reason for the public's discontent, with 69% of respondents agreeing. In fact, it was the only reason that people who lean or identify as either Democrats (55%) or Republicans (79%) agreed on.¹⁹

American students and families deserve public schools that will provide the foundational education they need to succeed, no matter the path they choose beyond high school. U.S. schools must re-center academic learning as the core mission of schooling. To this end, we believe the nation should set a goal for all students to reach universal basic literacy by fourth grade and advanced literacy by graduation. Universal basic literacy means that all students can read and write, at a minimum, at a level approaching proficiency on rigorous state and national assessments. By high school graduation, students should have proficient reading and writing skills as measured by rigorous state and national assessments, including assessments important to their post-graduation success, such as the ACT or ASVAB.²⁰ Numeracy by eighth grade means students have the skills to succeed in higher-level

math, such as algebra, statistics, or geometry, without needing remediation; by graduation, students must demonstrate sufficient math skills to persist in their chosen pathway of enrollment, enlistment, or employment.

Because states have always been the principal force in education policy, state policymakers must lead the charge of fulfilling these national goals, with the federal government providing assistance. State policymakers should aim not only to adopt proven reforms but also to hold school leaders accountable for high-quality implementation, an often overlooked lever for change. One critical task is to reorient state departments of education to become as focused on advancing classroom practice as they have been on monitoring compliance with state and federal laws. As successful states have shown, state departments should develop capacity to help schools and districts select and implement high-quality instructional materials, provide ongoing training to teachers through expert coaching and professional development aligned to curriculum choices, and embed the results of cognitive science and educational research — including the science of reading — in state-approved or funded instructional



materials and professional development. States must also use their power to license teachers to require prospective elementary and middle school teachers to demonstrate they know effective ways to teach reading, as well as enough math to provide quality instruction.

States should require schools to use evidence-based practices and student outcome data to promote the learning of all students, whether low performing, average, or advanced, and provide academic opportunities tailored to their level of mastery. We believe state policies that use a student's mastery as a basis of promotion at key intervals, such as the "third-grade reading gate" policies enacted in several states, help schools focus on their academic purpose. Finally, states must do more to ensure schools inform parents regularly of their child's progress in learning specific skills, their likelihood of success on end-of-year assessments or course passage, and what additional assistance their child may need. Only with greater communication can parents fulfill their responsibilities to support their child academically.

2. A larger voice for parents in school policies and decisions.

To rebuild the nation's trust in public schools, reformers must be honest and own up to past failures, especially the far too frequent "too little, too late" approach to engagement in communities bearing the brunt of changes. Too many parents and communities have felt that "reform" is done to them, not with them, and this has hampered the effectiveness of school improvement efforts in the last few decades. Parents in underserved communities are not alone in fighting the toxic "us versus them" dynamic that can develop between parents and educators. During the pandemic, policies on the length of school closures were largely made without parent input, leaving parents in all types of communities feeling abandoned by their schools at a time of stress and uncertainty.

Today, parents must grapple with emerging technologies like large language models and other forms of "artificial intelligence" that will affect not only children's school experiences but their future career prospects in as-yet-to-be-understood ways. Parents remain unsure whether AI use in schools is positive, but overwhelmingly report that schools are not communicating their policies to them, let alone engaging parents in their development.²¹

Parents need more voice in how schools confront challenges, old and new. Parents have unique and valuable expertise in their children, their fellow parents, and their communities. Schools should enlist them not simply as members of a parent-teacher association but as full participants in the school policymaking process through a formal role on school or district governing boards, and are part of advisory boards alongside school and community leaders. The more parents engage in the school decision-making process, the more knowledgeable they will become about the policies and laws that impact their children.

A new generation of parent organizations is empowering parents to be advocates who can use their voices, networks, and platforms to conduct parent polls, organize parent events, write op-eds, speak at community events, and testify in public hearings. The groups see parents as a co-equal interest group alongside teachers' unions and other stakeholders who have historically had more power in policy conversations. We see these new groups as a positive development and encourage schools to welcome them, rather than view them as adversaries.



3. A high-quality early childhood education program for every family that seeks one.

Early childhood education programs have been among the most popular policies of the last 25 years across the political spectrum, as long-term studies of their effectiveness continue to show stellar results.²² Multiple polls reveal that the public not only recognizes the importance of early childhood education but also believes that government should play a role in funding it.²³ This interest has translated into widespread efforts at the state level to increase early education opportunities, particularly for four-year-olds, with 44 states funding public pre-K programs as of spring 2024.²⁴ On the federal level, the Child Care and Development Fund and the Head Start program are the country's largest early childhood commitments, together totaling around \$21 billion as of fiscal year 2024,²⁵ but this funding predominantly targets families living below the federal poverty line, omitting sizable segments of working families who still cannot afford high-quality education or care.

Voters are keenly aware of the problem. Recent polling from the First Five Years Fund of 2024 Senate battleground states shows that the public perceives access to affordable, high-quality early learning opportunities to be a major issue that affects both working families and the economy, and overwhelmingly supports policies aimed at addressing this issue.²⁶ The organization's 2025 poll of registered voters, including an oversample of Republican primary voters, found that a large majority (91% of Republicans and Independents, 97% of Democrats) agreed that the cost of child care is a crisis and increasing federal funding is a priority (72% of Republications, 70% of Independents, 90% of Democrats).²⁷

Like voters, we believe increased federal investment in high-quality early learning and care programs is imperative, both for the sake of children's future success and the immediate needs of families with young children. However, just as we argue for greater choice and quality in K-12 public schools, we contend that access to low-quality early learning programs is not access at all. We believe new federal funding to help states build on their existing early care and education programs must require states and providers to commit to evidence-based quality standards before receiving federal funds. The federal government should also hold states and providers accountable for maintaining quality or risk losing their eligibility for the program. For existing programs like Head Start and federally funded child care, the federal government must continue to increase quality standards nationwide to match the same evidence-based quality standards that nationally recognized states use for their own programs. Finally, we strongly support the continued expansion of the Child Tax Credit to help families afford the high-quality early education and care programs that are right for them.



4. A bridge from K-12 to adulthood.

Navigating the passage from high school into the workforce is more complicated than ever for today's students. Among economists, there is a general consensus that students need some form of post-secondary education, whether skills training, industry-recognized credentials or certifications, or two- or four-year college degrees.²⁸ Only about one-third of Americans aged 25 or older complete at least a bachelor's degree;²⁹ the other two-thirds must traverse a disparate and often opaque set of possible pathways into the world of work, sometimes with disastrous personal consequences. Some students enroll in two- or four-year colleges only to drop out after accumulating student debt but not enough credits for a degree.³⁰ Other recent high school graduates enter the workforce without the knowledge of or access to training programs that may lead to more skilled work that commands better pay, which can trap them in a cycle of low-wage, low-skill jobs.

Although a majority of American adults do not complete a college degree, the federal government spends roughly nine times as much on supporting higher education as it does on workforce-focused education, training, and assistance.³¹ This disparity makes neither moral nor logical sense: all children deserve an opportunity to find the future that best fits their needs and aspirations, and the economy demands more than one-third of adults have the ability to fill current and future skilled jobs. College is not the only path to a productive and fulfilling career; it is only the most obvious.

Federal, state, and local policymakers in both political parties have responded to this challenge by creating career pathways programs, which are a structured approach to education, training, and work experiences that guide individuals to specific career goals. They involve work and classroom learning experiences that lead to certifications, credentials, or degrees that prepare individuals for employment in fields that offer them a pathway to a good job and upward mobility. Career pathway programs include apprenticeships and internships, career and technical education, dual enrollment in high school and postsecondary education, career academies, early college high schools, boot camps for learning specific skills, and staffing, placement, and other assistance for those seeking jobs. High-quality career pathway programs have five features. First, they have an academic curriculum linked with labor market needs, leading to a recognized credential and a decent income. Second, they include career exposure and work, including engagement with and supervision by adults. Third, they include advisors and mentors who help participants navigate the questions and issues they confront, ensuring they complete the program. Fourth, they have a written civic compact among employers, trade associations, and community partners. Finally, they need supportive local, state, and federal policies that make these programs possible and that track participant outcomes.



We support expanding these high-quality career pathway programs in high schools through “earn-and-learn” and work-based learning models, apprenticeship opportunities, and dual enrollment in community college programs offering industry-recognized certifications.³² One barrier to a wider embrace of these programs in high schools is a lack of resources and support to build and operate them. High schools and their students could benefit from greater state and federal investment in career and technical education as well as a concerted effort on the part of policymakers to identify and reduce administrative barriers to creating these opportunities.³³ High schools must also ensure that these programs carry the same respect through rigor and school recognition as more traditionally academic pathways to reduce stigma surrounding the old school “vocational” education that was pushed on students seen as less capable than their peers.

REINVENTING THE SYSTEM

5. An expansion of public school choice and school autonomy.

Children and their families deserve public schools that meet their unique learning needs. We embrace diverse school models and public school

choice programs that reflect community needs, deliver results, and serve all students. We object to the idea that children should have to leave the public system to find a great education and reject the diversion of taxpayer funds to enrich unaccountable private schools. We want to be clear: our aim is to reinvent and reinvigorate public education, not abandon it, as many proponents of “universal” private school choice policies aim to do. PPI did not oppose early voucher experiments in Milwaukee and DC, which aimed to give low-income students an escape from their historically failing schools, because there were no viable public alternatives to neighborhood schools. Today, the growth of the public school choice movement shows that there’s a better way for all children, not just the lucky few. We categorically disavow the idea that publicly funded private school choice is the future of U.S. education policy, as we believe these policies and many of their supporters are waging an ideological battle against public education, which has historically served America as the great equalizer of opportunity. We urge Democrats to oppose universal or near-universal subsidies for private schools that operate with zero public accountability and instead support universal public school choice. Following the example of Presidents Clinton and Obama, Democrats should support the growth of high-quality charter schools, innovation schools, and other variations on public school choice.

At the heart of this robust agenda for public school choice is our steadfast support of high-quality charter schools. State policymakers should allow these schools to grow by removing statutory caps and equalizing their operational and facilities funding. Federal policymakers should continue to invest in the Charter Schools Program to create new schools, but should ease restrictions on these funds to allow state administrators to spend a greater percentage of their grants on technical assistance or to fund quality improvement initiatives for existing schools.

In addition to charter schools, we celebrate a host of public school models, including magnet schools, special-purpose schools, community schools, “innovation” schools, pedagogy-driven schools such as Montessori or classical schools, and other ways of reimagining the school experience for children. State and federal policymakers could do more — such as through funding and technical assistance — to encourage local school leaders to diversify their school models so that every child may find a great fit.

To increase access to great public school options — charter or traditional — we advocate the adoption of citywide or districtwide enrollment plans to streamline school selection and matriculation. States must also develop more flexible state and local funding systems to allow funding to follow children to their public school of choice and to enable open enrollment across district lines or dual enrollment opportunities in higher education.

Public school choice alone will not be enough to reinvent the system. We continue to strongly champion granting schools autonomy through the portfolio schools model, which serves as an alternative to a large district bureaucracy. The portfolio schools model decentralizes decision-making for school operations and redesigns the role of the district to focus on authorizing schools within its portfolio, supporting school leaders and teachers, and holding schools accountable. It then empowers families to choose among all of the schools, charter or traditional, within the portfolio. The long-term, remarkable growth of students in New Orleans³⁴ shows what is possible with this model and a sustained commitment to structural change.

High-performing autonomous schools require expert school authorizing, as we have learned from the charter movement, where persistently low-performing charters signal weak authorizing quality. We propose the creation of a federal school

authorizer program that would provide charter or portfolio school authorizers with resources to improve their policy and practice to meet national benchmarks for quality. We recognize that while resources are important, states must hold authorizers accountable for closing low-performing schools of choice. As part of this duty, state policymakers should ensure all authorizers are subject to third-party evaluation and oversight with the power to close or recommend the closure or restructuring of bad authorizers.



6. An unwavering commitment to accountability for all schools that receive public dollars.

One great mistake of the last decade is the nation’s retreat from holding districts and schools accountable for results. No Child Left Behind had flaws, but its animating principle — that all children can learn and that we should measure, report, and hold ourselves accountable for their results — pushed the nation forward.³⁵ Following the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act and in the era of COVID, many states have watered down their accountability systems or assessments to help schools appear more successful, while students fall further behind.

At the same time, proliferating private school choice programs, which are often touted as a response to poor achievement in public schools, frequently require little to no academic accountability for participating schools, let alone the administration of a common annual state assessment.³⁶ In fact, the ideal for these new policies is not about holding schools accountable for results, or ensuring a diploma is meaningful, or targeting kids with no prior options. So far, “universal” programs’ greatest beneficiaries have been people who have already opted their children out of the public system and who now get government subsidies for doing so.³⁷ Perhaps this is why the private school choice movement has thus far been unsuccessful at passing any of their statewide ballot initiatives, even in conservative states like Kentucky or Nebraska: when voters are asked to decide whether to invest public dollars in private education, potentially to the detriment of public schools, they reject the idea.³⁸ It should come as no surprise that polling by PPI in 2023 found that working-class voters reject private school vouchers by a nearly two-to-one margin, preferring instead to make all public schools high quality.³⁹

Without strong accountability to students, families, and taxpayers, it is far too easy to lose focus on whether schools help children learn. America cannot leave success to chance; we must measure our progress using rigorous state assessments and be honest about the results for every school that receives public dollars. We believe in a federal requirement for annual state testing in reading and math from grades 3-8, and once in high school. We support testing in science and history on reasonable but academically significant timelines. We call for greater transparency for parents on the purpose and length of standardized assessments, whether state or local, and clear reporting to parents on results.

Accountability models should include a mix of assessment- and attainment-based meaningful student outcome measures. Test-based indicators should not only include proficiency rates but also valid and reliable growth measures for students in elementary and middle grades, which recognize the hard work of students and schools and incentivize schools to focus on students across the performance spectrum. States should also measure the size of achievement gaps and hold schools accountable for making progress towards closing them over time. For high schools, accountability models should focus on whether students have made material progress towards, and ultimately attained, a high school diploma that represents that the graduate has the skills and knowledge to be successful in college or career. In addition to test-based measures, high school measures could include the passage of state-required coursework, progress towards or attainment of industry certifications, or the completion and passage of college-level coursework.

Accountability requires not only measurement but action. Although we believe in a support-first approach, we champion policies to close persistently failing schools, whether charter or traditional. Where school closures are not feasible — such as in rural areas — we advocate state intervention models that provide temporary leadership and build local capacity so that schools can return to local control after achieving sustained success.

7. A new model for the teaching profession.

Much like the demands of the wider modern workplace, the job of a teacher has become increasingly complex. Education preparation programs and licensure methods, however, have remained largely static, despite two decades of calls for change. Because educator licensure requires a bachelor’s degree — or sometimes

a master's degree if a candidate does not complete an undergraduate preparation program — becoming a teacher is a significant financial investment. Teacher compensation, though, has not kept pace with other professions requiring a bachelor's, yet the primary means to increase one's compensation while remaining in the classroom is to spend more money to get yet another degree. Meanwhile, states and districts devote considerable financial resources to providing professional development and other training to new and existing teachers on topics that they should have learned in their preservice training, all while schools are spending more and more on education generally.

Policymakers must become serious about implementing the last two decades' worth of great ideas to reform how teachers are trained, licensed, and compensated if we want to prevent teacher shortages from disrupting progress in education. We believe states must challenge the teacher training monopoly by embracing “educator apprenticeships” outside of traditional institutions of higher education, as well as performance-based licensure pathways for professionals with bachelor's degrees outside of education. We also believe states must exercise their authority to decertify as licensure-eligible pathways those traditional educator preparation programs whose graduates struggle to pass certification exams or perform poorly once in the classroom. To provide more students access to the best teachers while expanding opportunities for mentorship for new or struggling teachers, states must pilot and scale models of teacher leadership that differentiate teacher roles within schools. We also call for states to shift away from using the attainment of advanced degrees and years of experience as measures of expertise in licensure, tenure, and compensation policies. We embrace tiered licensure systems, which allow teachers to progress from novices to recognized experts over time as they demonstrate competence in their



profession, and we support ending current tenure laws and policies, which keep bad teachers in the classroom far longer than conscience allows. Finally, we believe states must reorient their compensation systems to reward a teacher's skills, subject-matter competence, and responsibilities.

8. A strong but targeted national role.

No nation can survive without an educated citizenry. Although some regard public education as strictly a state and local matter, the quality of our schools and our students' cognitive, social, and work skills are vital national interests. Our country's economic future hinges on a skilled, adaptable workforce, yet our legacy school system often fails to prepare all students for the jobs of today, let alone the jobs of tomorrow. Better public schools are essential to delivering on America's core promise of equal opportunity and social mobility. We must reaffirm and defend the federal government's responsibilities for public education, while respecting the role of the states in making education policy. We call for a strong but targeted national role for the federal government, chiefly through the U.S. Department of Education, which encompasses these duties:

- **Setting academic goals for the nation's schoolchildren and holding states accountable for their promises:**

While education is primarily the domain of the states, the country must play a role in setting high, clear academic goals for schoolchildren that represent the minimum expectation of graduates from public schools in any of the United States. States should create plans for how they will ensure students meet these national goals, as well as set additional goals or higher goals based on their local context. Although the implementation of both No Child Left Behind and the Every Student Succeeds Act operated in this fashion, the Department of Education has rarely held states accountable for breaking their promises, nor have they provided state-specific assistance when it becomes clear that a state will not meet agreed-upon goals. We believe progress requires a more robust national role in ensuring states live up to their own agreements and faithfully execute their own plans while strengthening the support the U.S. government provides states to do this work.

- **Providing timely and accurate information on the condition and progress of American education:**

Educators and policymakers need data to make the best decisions for children. The federal government has long ensured districts, states, policymakers, and families have transparent and trustworthy data about American public schools and the children they serve, including what children know and are able to do. The U.S. Department of Education is the primary source of funding for high-quality research in education, helping state and national policymakers as well as educators understand “what works” from specific teaching strategies, to curriculum, to programs, and even state and federal policies. Recent cuts to the research and data operations of the Department harm the nation’s ability to make good decisions about how to improve public

schools for every child. We support a strong, well-funded research and data arm of the Department that is organized around studying and promoting what works for children, what children have learned in American schools, and what new and promising practices states and schools are pioneering to advance the cause of great public schools for every child.

- **Funding states to ensure great public schools for every child:**

Although state shares of federal dollars vary based on the size of their student populations qualifying for various funding streams, around 14% of all government spending on K-12 students comes from the federal government.⁴⁰ Generally, this funding is highly targeted to provide educational opportunities for specific populations of children. We believe Congress must not only maintain these funding streams but should increase several of them, including funds for students with disabilities and funds for children living in poverty. While we support easing some restrictions on the use of federal funds, we oppose consolidated block grants, which will reduce the likelihood that these funds reach the students for whom they are intended and open the risk of fraud, waste, and abuse when administered by a severely weakened Department of Education.

- **Ensuring civil rights protections:** One of the federal government’s key responsibilities is ensuring that children of all backgrounds and abilities have equal access to great public schools. Civil rights protections apply not only to categories like race and gender but also to disability status. The U.S. government’s role in protecting civil rights provides an important counterweight to the role of the states in implementing education policies. In the last several administrations, this function has become highly politicized with the Office of Civil Rights using “Dear Colleague” letters

to advance political priorities outside of Congressional or other regulatory processes. This has led to wide pendulum swings in policy in short periods of time, with children and their schools caught in the middle. The federal government must return to enforcing properly enacted law and policy to protect the rights of children.

- **Promoting innovation while setting guardrails:**

The best education ideas rarely come from Washington, D.C. With its national vantage point, though, the U.S. government has tremendous power to convene state and local leaders to seek solutions to common problems, to procure and offer technical assistance from national experts, to encourage innovative ideas through discretionary funding opportunities, and to disseminate best practices. We believe it also has the responsibility to set guardrails to protect students from discrimination and other threats to their health and welfare while attending school, to ensure the responsible use of emerging technologies like AI, and to prevent unethical use of students' personal data and information.

9. A civic education that teaches our children what it means to be an American.

Public schools are among the last shared civic institutions in American life; when they falter, social cohesion erodes, and public trust declines. Although schools have a mission to create a knowledgeable and engaged citizenry, a majority of today's students lack an adequate understanding of American history or civics.⁴¹ At the same time, the Trump administration's actions to launch retaliatory investigations and enforcement actions against critics, deploy the power of the police state against constitutionally protected speech, and abrogate the due process rights of individuals have shaken our constitutional norms, threatening the very foundation of our democracy.



Defending our principles in a time of intensifying civil strife requires a new emphasis on civic education that teaches students about the nation's founding ideals and why they are worthy of safeguarding. Focusing on our shared American values can help children from all backgrounds forge a common sense of citizenship and ensure our country's diversity remains an incredible strength. To this end, policymakers should provide more resources, and hold schools accountable, for teaching students an honest but hopeful account of American history, which frankly recounts America's sins but also explains the ways in which liberal democratic norms make redemption possible. Young people should also have opportunities to gain positive experiences in civic life that instill a sense of purpose and patriotism, but the Trump administration's recent and devastating cuts to national service programs have weakened the most widely accessible of these opportunities. We believe Congress should not only reverse those cuts but also further expand community service programs in elementary and secondary schools and national service programs after high school.

CONCLUSION

America today lacks a broad public and political consensus for dramatic improvements in our K-12 schools. The political right is filling the vacuum with divisive, unserious proposals. The political left is stuck defending a system that too many families no longer believe in. But the door is open — for a new narrative, vision, and generation of reform leadership. This is our chance to reclaim education as a national cause and move from crisis to confidence that our children will receive the public education they deserve.

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[Rachel Canter](#) is the Director of Education Policy at the Progressive Policy Institute. In her role at PPI, Rachel advocates effective education policies as informed by her nearly two decades of experience successfully leading change for public school children in Mississippi. She aims to reignite the nation's commitment to providing every child an excellent public education and seeks to build a broad coalition for improving public schools.

ABOUT THE REINVENTING AMERICA'S SCHOOLS PROJECT

[The Reinventing America's Schools Project](#) seeks to refocus national leadership around proven strategies to improve public schools and educational achievement. We believe that American public schools must prepare children academically to be successful adults and citizens; families should have a voice in their child's education, including a choice within the public system to find a school that best fits their child's needs; and, though education is the province of the states, the federal government must protect the promise that every child will have access to a quality public education.

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