

A report from the **Education Futures Council**

# Ours to Solve, Once—and for All

Securing the outcomes our students **need**



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**Ours to Solve, Once—and for All**  
**SECURING THE OUTCOMES OUR STUDENTS NEED**



October 2024

Hoover Institution

Stanford University | Stanford, California

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OCTOBER 2024

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**I**n the fall of 2023, the Hoover Institution formed the Education Futures Council to review and analyze the state of public education in America. We on the Council recognize that the future of our country—its security, prosperity, and social cohesion—rests on the certainty of providing every child with access to a high-quality education. The Council is diverse by design; we reflect a wide range of personal and professional life experiences that span the political spectrum. Supported by a team of policy experts and researchers, we have developed a new approach on how the public education system can be revitalized to address its most pressing challenges. This report is the culmination of our work.

We have identified fundamental barriers within the current K–12 public education system that prevent far too many students from succeeding and thriving. Our “True North” must always point toward student outcomes. Despite a national commitment to the issue, steep increases in funding, and decades of reform efforts, our current system has been unable to reverse poor student outcomes, particularly for low income students and students of color. This failure goes against who we profess to be as a nation.

We aim to make far better use of the considerable talent, assets, and efforts that exist in our public school institutions. In offering solutions, our report calls for a new approach that focuses on organizing for student-based results—flipping the system from top-down to bottom-up—minimizing mandates while embracing incentives, and cultivating and rewarding professional mastery in the education workforce. Each component of the proposed new operating system is deliberately influenced by the other components, and the plan is designed to be executed as a whole.

On behalf of the Education Futures Council, we hope this report builds motivation and commitment for change. Together we can launch a new approach to address the current state of public education in America and provide every child with the foundational opportunities they deserve.

*Jean-Claude Brizard*

*Mitch Daniels*

*Chris Howard*

*Andrew Luck*

*Frances Messano*

*Condoleezza Rice*



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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**The Council was unanimous in the view that dramatic action is no longer a matter of public urgency; it is a matter of public emergency.**

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## Introduction

In 2023 the Hoover Institution at Stanford University convened a group of innovation leaders to take stock of K–12 public education in the United States. The Education Futures Council quickly focused on designing a new approach for America’s traditional public school system. Schools operated and overseen by local school boards—often called “traditional” or “district” schools—enroll 75 percent of all students in the United States and will continue to be a prominent part of the education landscape no matter what other schooling choices exist.

The Council was unanimous in the view that dramatic action is no longer a matter of public urgency; it is a matter of public emergency. High-performing public schools are one of the cornerstones of a safe and healthy democracy. Providing a consistently high quality of education to all students, in all communities, entails a unique public trust, and the success or failure of that endeavor has a direct and determinative effect on the future prosperity and security of our country. Unless we urgently undertake a thorough revamp of the most utilized school option, our children will bear directly the harms of our complacency.

The Council immediately confronted a perplexing contradiction. We are abundantly blessed with dedicated teachers and other school personnel, the best education research apparatus in the world, and strong support from families and communities. At the same time, academic outcomes in district schools vary widely but on average achieve underwhelming results, despite decades of funding increases and attempts at reform. According to virtually

every available metric, the overall quality of American schools has either declined or remained stagnant since the 1970s. On a per-pupil basis, we now spend 40 percent more than the average spent by member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). At the same time, we are ranked thirty-fourth in math globally on the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) evaluations.

## Change Is Imperative

A full understanding of the long trend of student performance includes a sober recounting of the astounding array of efforts to improve our schools and the learning they provide. Retrospective reviews and evaluations identify a set of common design features that help explain their shortcomings.<sup>1</sup> Most reforms target marginal changes, mostly to inputs, that are expected to catalyze systemic change. Many are singular designs that may not suit local conditions equally. Proposed solutions originate far from classrooms, imposed via regulation or mandate, insinuating that other parties know what's best. Finally, the impatience for rapid impact leads to pervasive churn of reforms, in turn fueling mistrust and frustration at every level of the hierarchy.

It is little surprise that, rather than realizing their original aims, multiple well-intentioned but ill-fitting efforts have instead created the unintended consequence of pervasive resistance to change and resilience in maintaining the status quo. We now preserve a system that doesn't serve us.

Even without considering poor results for students, we should have grave concern about an immutable hierarchy. The number and magnitude of structural changes that are underway in our nation—we call them “tectonic shifts”—are reshaping our population, its demographic composition, our communities and their labor forces, and the collective social contracts that bind us. Importantly, these shifts singularly and in total will affect communities in uneven ways, requiring almost all to react, albeit in different ways. The outlook does not bode well if our chief engine of human capital development is incapable of adapting to a changing world.

### THE EDUCATION FUTURES COUNCIL APPROACH

This proposal starts from a different premise than that of many past reform proposals. Many of the barriers that impede the education progress our country needs lie in the structure and function of the system itself—that is, the arrangement of, and interactions among, the institutions we have charged with the critical public service of educating our children.

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These institutions—the local school boards, state agencies, and federal authorities that all have a say in the workings of modern schools—are not the product of coherent and thoughtful design. Rather, they evolved over decades to a point where they hinder more than help the cause of improved outcomes for all students.

Changing the way these institutions are organized and function—what we call the “operating system” of public education—will raise trust, respect, agency, and empowerment for teachers and principals and will provide essential support from other education leaders. In refocusing change in this way, we increase the chance that existing examples of success can be expanded to accelerate improvement.

It bears noting that we specifically separated the exercise of design from questions of how to implement it. The guiding thinking is to decide on what is the best approach; implementation concerns will become clearer and more manageable with a specific destination in hand.

## New Foundations: The Operating Essentials

Mirroring other high-performing efforts across sectors, countries, and institutions, the new operating system depends on essential operations at the outset in order to work productively. These operations include:

- **Environmental conditions.** Universal baseline conditions are needed to create safe, healthy, and orderly schooling environments.
- **Definitions of student success.** Ubiquitous criteria for multifaceted student success that stress and also go beyond academic mastery create shared performance targets.
- **Regular, arm's-length evaluation of student performance.** Independent assessments that produce fair, valid, and reliable information on student learning and advancement at the individual and aggregate levels propel critical functions throughout the operating system.
- **Accountability for performance.** Feedback systems map results from learning assessments and educator evaluations onto benchmarked frameworks that drive decisions about future actions. Schools' learning scores are associated with differing improvement pathways, including an evidence-based, community-engaged process for addressing underperforming schools and a menu of programmatic choices that grows as performance increases.

## A New System Design

### RATIONALE

The new system builds on a singular reality: only teachers and principals have both the unique local knowledge of their students, families, and communities and the ability to shape the classroom experience to create learning that meets the identified needs.

If we assign teachers and principals the *responsibility* for student learning—and we should—we also must provide them with the appropriate authority and the necessary *resources and capacity* to execute on the responsibility we assign to them. None of these required ingredients is sufficient on its own, but together they create the correct motivation and agency for focused learning environments to thrive. Even more important, teachers and principals who are empowered with these endowments have

shown that they continuously improve their approaches in response to feedback about their students. This is the heart of the new operating system design, presented in figure ES-1.

### NEW ROLES FOR EDUCATION AGENCIES

A priority of the new operating system is to lessen regulatory mandates so as to free up school-level personnel to choose program and instructional modifications that will help students learn better. To do this, local school boards, state agencies, and federal authorities that currently have a say in the workings of schools will refocus their energy on supporting the efforts of local schools to build capacity and to deliver strong student results.

These agencies, by scaling back their efforts to control activity in classrooms and schools through regulation and mandates, can instead focus on leveraging their respective assets and position to accomplish these goals:

1. **Achieve economies of scale** to reduce costs—monetary and operational—faced by schools, including supporting regional collaborations.
2. **Create new evidence and expand our knowledge** about education. In particular, the federal government has a unique role to play in supporting a significant increase in education research and development to expand the scope of proven education approaches.
3. **Translate and disseminate current knowledge**, facilitating the local capacity for continuous improvement by building shared Knowledge Bases to accelerate improvement work in schools.
4. **Design incentives and allocate resources** to prompt voluntary local change that aligns with desired student outcomes and accelerates progress.

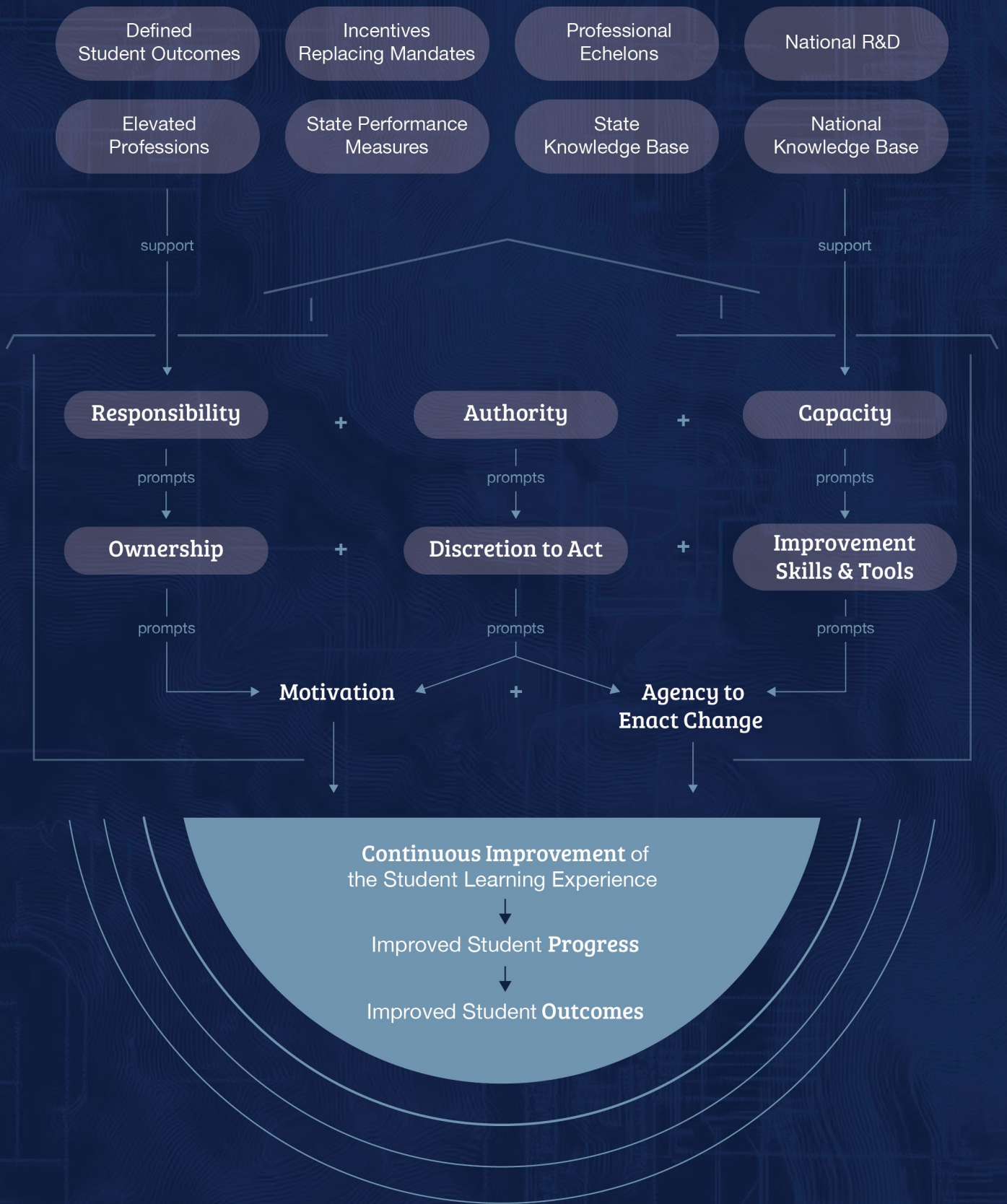
### A NEW PROFESSIONAL PARTNERSHIP

Teachers and school leaders provide to the nation a critical public service that deserves better recognition. The new design recasts the occupations' professional status and recognition. Most teachers and principals today are highly committed to their roles; the new system design builds on and promotes these efforts. It also provides a path to a new professionalism, reinforced by state and federal incentive programs for local adoption of competency-based designations for teachers and principals. These designations will augment existing compensation and recognition programs to better shape the teacher labor force in the direction of producing the student outcomes our students and our nation desire.



# Figure ES-1: Design for New US K–12 Public Education Operating System

Continuous Improvement in Schools to Elevate Student Outcomes



## How to Build the New Operating System

Fortunately, our existing institutional arrangements already have components needed by the new operating system. Using them along with new roles and responsibilities, we can create a blueprint for the new operating system. The blueprint depends on new commitments in four areas:

### COMMITMENT 1: ORGANIZE SYSTEM-WIDE FOR STUDENT RESULTS

All roads in the new system should be directed to the “True North” pursuit of student outcomes. Student progress toward and attainment of a broad set of clearly defined outcomes must galvanize and drive the new design. This overarching architecture ensures that student performance becomes the lens through which all educational decisions are processed and made. Student performance results not only will be transparent and illuminated, but also will serve as the primary reference point around which the effectiveness of programs, policies, and operating practices is assessed.

### COMMITMENT 2: FLIP THE SYSTEM FROM TOP-DOWN TO BOTTOM-UP

In the flipped system hierarchy, schools are the apex organization. They need sufficient discretion to make decisions in situ to manage their own operations and to adapt their efforts to address the needs of their students. Local education agencies, such as districts or networks of districts, take on the role of delivering supportive leadership to schools by ensuring that they have effective leaders, managing important operational functions on their behalf and serving as local governors of performance.

State agencies will contribute what they and only they can provide. They are best suited to functions that require equivalence in all school settings, such as standards, assessments and accountability determinations, efficient management of funding, and the design of evidence-based improvement pathways for their schools. States also have a unique and untapped capacity to accelerate improvements in student learning. By linking their measures of performance to local contexts, they can provide a curated Knowledge Base that guides local adoption of effective education solutions.

There are valuable and unique contributions that are possible only from the national or federal level as well. There is no question that protection of civil rights, the assurance that necessary services will be provided to students with special needs, and the provision of targeted support for at-risk populations are worthy of federal attention and support. Rethinking and redesigning the state-federal relationship, with a goal of lifting regulatory burdens and establishing roles and

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responsibilities in a clear and coherent fashion, would advance our schools. Through national benchmarking of student performance, the federal government would also serve the critical role of aligning state performance assessments and tracking performance of US students relative to international competition. The federal sphere also is uniquely positioned to build new knowledge about success in public education. No other entity at any level of the system has the scope and means to build programs of research and evaluation to advance the body of fundamental knowledge about effective strategies to educate our students. Having a nationwide perspective lends itself to creation of a national-level Knowledge Base to disseminate what we already know about successful school models and programs. There are economies of scale in the endeavor because all states and localities can benefit simultaneously from better knowledge.

### **COMMITMENT 3: MINIMIZE MANDATES, EMBRACE INCENTIVES**

Decades of positive disposition toward regulations have built massive tomes of federal and state requirements; these need to be significantly reduced to free talent and resources throughout the system for higher purposes. Incentives have been proven tools to promote behavior in ways that directly align with overall goals. Evidence shows that students, families, teachers, and communities respond to incentives they perceive as working to their benefit.

### **COMMITMENT 4: CULTIVATE AND REWARD PROFESSIONAL MASTERY IN THE EDUCATOR WORKFORCE**

Our country is blessed with an abundance of dedicated and high-performing teachers, so any discussion about professionalism of US educators implicitly has a dual purpose. The first is to elevate the standing of high-performing teachers to higher levels of regard inside and outside the workplace. Improving the social standing and perception of teachers and principals as valued professionals directly relates to the ability to recruit and retain teachers, as well as positioning the field for enriched recognition for their contributions. The second purpose is to establish the requirement inherent in all professions to define and uphold high-quality work as the expected standard.

## **The System in Motion: How the Parts Fit Together**

We can expect different behavior from educators under the new system design. If student results serve as the beacon, it is easier to create common purpose inside schools. When school teams have operating latitude because of fewer mandates, they can focus more on effective instruction and family engagement. They have the freedom and personal agency to modify models and practices to elevate instructional success, using regular feedback and performance benchmarks to guide the process. If needed, they are free to select proven context-appropriate alternatives to improve their students' learning, including new school models, aided by local state and federal efforts to use their considerable stores of performance information to identify and share proven approaches from within their own domains.

But this design is not an à la carte menu from which policymakers pick and choose. We are proposing a comprehensive operating system, and we can't install portions and expect favorable results. The approach we propose here is designed for deep interaction and

interdependency. Each component of the new operating system interacts with and is influenced by the other parts, on purpose. None of the parts standing alone can deliver the impact we need for our children; staggered adoption triggers the all-too-familiar resistance and functional failure, long before the full model is given the chance it needs to breathe and flourish.

## **Conclusion**

The sustained, deep improvement we need in US public K–12 education will not happen by focusing only on a subset of the system or going all-in on one aspect or element. Improvement happens by sustaining a series of small wins throughout the system. This is what creates and feeds conditions for long periods of change. This is what retrains and reorients the underlying conditions, behaviors, incentives, resources, and work of the system. The Operating Essentials and systems commitments outlined in this report highlight that, at this critical juncture, skill building must be matched with will building. We must collectively create the will to fundamentally reorient to True North to build the sector we and our children need for productive, civil, and fulfilled futures.

We cannot spend another minute delegating the fate of our children—and our collective future—to the people who come after us.

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# INTRODUCTION

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**While we may debate the exact contours of “safe and healthy democracy,” there is broad consensus within the United States that preparing students with the knowledge, skills, habits, mind-sets, and capabilities to flourish rates as a core societal function.**

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In 2023, the Hoover Institution of Stanford University convened an ideologically and politically diverse group of innovation leaders to take stock of K–12 public education in the United States. The Education Futures Council was charged with finding ways to improve American education to ensure strong and sustainable outcomes for all US students. The Council formulated an improved path forward for our nation.

The Education Futures Council focused on designing a new approach for America’s traditional public school system. Schools operated and overseen by local school boards—often called “traditional” or “district” schools—enroll 75 percent of US students and will continue to be a prominent part of the education landscape no matter what other schooling choices exist. They remain the primary focus of state and federal education efforts as well. This slice of the overall education sector was highlighted as the most in need of improvement.

The bulk of our public schools have weaker academic outcomes than students need, despite significant investments. These schools have had years of increasing funding; current levels are 40 percent more than the average expenditures of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, with nothing to show for it.<sup>2</sup>

Using internal standards, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) revealed that student learning has flattened or declined; disaggregating the results by student demography or socioeconomic status reveals shocking, heartbreaking achievement gaps borne by our most vulnerable students.<sup>3</sup> Using global comparisons, the United States is ranked thirty-fourth in math on the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) evaluations.<sup>4</sup> This places the nation alongside Malta and the Slovak Republic, not the high-performing nations of the world. Even if the entire country reached the same level as our top-rated state, Massachusetts, it would rank only eighth in the international comparisons.

These results are no surprise, but earlier attempts to intervene and change the trajectory of performance at scale have been thwarted. Powerful forces have perpetuated a system that has blatantly written off the performance of millions of students. For decades, they have co-opted authority for their own interests and skewed the enterprise away from student outcomes, in effect saying, “Not my problem.”

We say: It is our problem, and it is ours to solve.

**The Council was unanimous in the view that dramatic action is no longer a matter of public urgency; it is a matter of public emergency.** Those inside the education sector know the full scope of the crisis and its threat to the foundations of our democracy, but it remains opaque in the public mind. Students, families, and communities are unfamiliar with or unmoved by the overwhelming difference strong educational preparation can make over the course of a lifetime. It is shameful that the quality of US K–12 public education ranks tenth in importance in national polls.<sup>5</sup>

The stakes could not be higher. Public education is one of the critical cornerstones of a functioning, safe, and healthy democracy. While we may debate the exact contours of “safe and healthy democracy,” there is broad consensus within the United States that preparing students with the knowledge, skills, habits, mind-sets, and capabilities to flourish rates as a core societal function.

The provision of schooling for our children entails a unique public trust. The commitment to preparing them with what they need to succeed in life is made in statehouses, schoolhouses, and courthouses. The vehicle through which we deliver this critical function is our school system, and more specifically, schools and classrooms. We send children to schools for more than a decade of their lives, and what happens to them goes on to impact them and their communities for the rest of their lives.

The education of young people also has a direct, determinative effect on our country’s social, political, economic, and international capabilities. Our nation is at significant risk of lower economic productivity, weaker national security, and more fragile health and social

systems if we do not fix the problem. Our economic well-being depends on the skills of our society; by shortchanging students out of the education they are promised, we defund their future and ours as well. It is not an overreach to say that the survival of our democracy itself depends on our system’s ability to deliver on its promises.

## The Education Futures Council Approach

This report starts from a different premise than many past reform proposals. Many of the barriers that impede the education progress our country needs lie in the structure and function of the system itself—that is, the arrangement of, and interactions among, the institutions we have charged with the critical public service of educating our children.

These institutions—the local school boards, state agencies, and federal authorities that all have a say in the workings of modern schools—are not the product of coherent and thoughtful design. Rather, they evolved over the decades to a point of hindering more than helping the cause of improved outcomes for all students. Changing the way these institutions organize and function—what we call the “operating system” of public education—will raise trust, respect, agency, and empowerment for teachers and principals and provide essential support from other education leaders.

The Council recognizes that there exist many examples of educational success, even if they have not been spotlighted or shared. In addition, there is a narrow record of success in improving schools with professional development, curricula, and school design. The Council, in fact, builds on these to accelerate improvement.

It bears noting that we specifically separated the exercise of design from questions of how to implement it. The guiding thinking was to decide on what is the best approach; implementation concerns will become clearer and more manageable when a specific destination is in hand.

## Summary of the New Operating System

We envision an operating system for the traditional US K–12 sector much different from the one in place today. Even though many of the parts look familiar, the new system integrates them in a more effective way to activate different actions and results.

The proposed solution embodies our national pledge to provide a quality public education for every student. Ensuring equity and high quality for all students requires going beyond aspiration to a commitment to full transparency about results. Making our quality commitment concrete necessitates that the system provide three essential operations: clear details of the

outcomes we expect for our students, regular arm’s-length assessment of student learning using common measures, and accountability for performance. With these essentials in place, feedback about student learning and progress is the same everywhere, which is essential for managing learning at the school level and for other improvement functions described below.

A final commitment ought to be a no-brainer: learning environments must be safe, healthy, and free of disruptions in the learning day.

A lot of learning happens outside of school settings, but the place most families rely on to educate their students is the public school classroom. There is an implied contract at work: students and families commit to being prepared for and engaged in school while classroom teachers, other educational personnel, and principals ensure the delivery of effective instruction to every student. (Throughout the report, we include as teachers those with ancillary roles, such as reading specialists, special education service providers, and so forth.) The new system builds on that singular reality: only teachers and principals have the unique local knowledge of their students, families, and communities and have the ability to shape directly the classroom experience to create learning that meets these needs.

If we assign to teachers and principals the *responsibility* for student learning—and we should—they also must have appropriate *authority* and the necessary *resources and capacity* to execute on the responsibility we assign to them.

“Responsibility for learning” isn’t new per se, but for our public trust to be fulfilled, all teachers and principals must fully own their roles as creators of learning. Uniformly, student learning is the organizing principle in schools where all the adults accept the mission and align their efforts toward creating those results. Teachers and principals themselves are lifelong learners who actively work toward full mastery of their professional abilities throughout their careers. The new system recognizes and supports the crucial role of educators and principals by advancing their status to a level on par with other professions.

**Placing “authority for learning” at the school level creates discretion for teachers and leaders to respond to the needs of their students.** They have the space to adjust the playlist as needed throughout the year to better support student learning. Equally important, they can use their discretion to evolve their instruction year over year in pursuit of improved student learning. Commitment to improvement is an enduring cultural attribute in empowered schools. It demands that flexibility be given and authentically embraced. It means schools will look different from one another and schools

themselves will be different over time; the system must not simply allow it but must nurture it. Forging dynamic organizations has the added benefit of increasing the readiness of schools to adapt to the expected dramatic shifts in their environments in the coming years. Giving local school teams authority calibrated to their performance opens space for higher-level education agencies to assume duties that are better tailored to their position and expertise.

“Local capacity” refers to the ability of teachers and principals to manage the learning experience and alter it based on student needs. It assumes that responsibility and authority for learning are already in place. We already have strong examples of principals as instructional coaches who support teachers in short-cycle modification of instructional materials, practice, and supports for students. In the new system, principals also assume the role of team leaders in longer-cycle reviews to identify areas to strengthen for added future impact as students progress through their schooling. **The longer-cycle part of local capacity involves school teams identifying root causes, searching for appropriate solutions, engaging with students and families in selecting an improvement option, and managing and monitoring resulting outcomes.** To maximize effective change, school leaders and teams look for solutions with proven success in similar contexts, including proven practices and models from outside the traditional school model. Local, state, and federal education agencies help to build and extend school leaders’ and teams’ knowledge and competence.

Even with the best of intentions, there will be cases where the levels of responsibility or capacity in some schools are insufficient to leverage the authority conferred on schools. The new operating system includes a school reboot protocol to address these cases, described below.

Plans for change extend to the rest of the current system as well. The new design moves the remaining education entities, such as state and federal education agencies, away from efforts to manage what happens in schools and classrooms from afar. The use of mandates that force uniform conduct is curtailed. The thicket of existing regulations that constrain the ability of local school teams to exercise discretion is thinned. Refocusing local, state, and federal agencies will leverage their unique locational advantages by providing critically important support functions in the new “flipped” system. Performance, not compliance, is incentivized.

Education agencies that operate at a distance from the classroom, such as state and federal education departments, will have four general functions. First, distant agencies will leverage their respective abilities to

achieve economies of scale to reduce costs—monetary and operational—faced by schools. Managing resource flows, providing common data reporting and analysis, and conducting regulatory housecleaning are examples of actions that benefit from scale.

Second, education agencies at each level will leverage their field of vision to create evidence and expand knowledge about education. As a sector, these agencies are woefully behind in having a rich foundation of evidence-based findings about effective instruction and school organization. Compared to other disciplines, they are sorely lacking in rigorous investigations and analyses. Local agencies will build on local experience and data, with state and federal agencies taking larger roles as their domains allow. In particular, the federal role will focus on dramatically increasing primary research and development to accelerate the pace of knowledge creation across the education spectrum. At every agency level, new efforts to highlight and broadcast emerging evidence or advances in primary research will accelerate sharing and dissemination of current knowledge to the field.

Third, distant agencies can also play an important support role in facilitating the local capacity for continuous improvement by taking on translation and dissemination of current knowledge. There are many successful operational ideas in their midst that are not being leveraged. Each agency could build next-generation Knowledge Bases to bring searchable, actionable solutions to teachers and principals. The Knowledge Base will cover student success as well as operating or managing efforts. Entry into the Knowledge Base will be limited to only proven education models and programs that include details about the contexts in which success is (and is not) achieved. In addition, an Instructional Commons populated with course playbooks from top-performing educators would bring high-quality resources within reach of every teacher.

Fourth, distant education agencies can replace mandates and new regulation with targeted incentive programs designed to improve student outcomes by prompting local change and innovation. Revisions of staffing patterns, school structures, classroom configurations, bell schedules, learning environments, and knowledge sharing, when appropriately matched to local contexts, can amplify student learning and provide families with additional learning options.

State agencies have additional responsibilities. They own the system-wide essential functions of defining, measuring, and evaluating student learning and outcomes across all the schools in their state. Aggregate measures reveal the degree of improvement that can be fostered in schools. State agencies will cultivate improvement by calibrating the degree of operating discretion a

school may exercise and through voluntary incentives to accelerate evidence-based changes in school practices. For example, a school may have measures of student learning that place it near the average of schools in its state. The state makes available to that school (and others in similar positions) the chance to adopt discretionary authorities in such areas as staff mix, curriculum, control over discretionary spending, and so on. Top-performing schools would be eligible for a status called Earned Autonomy that provides full discretion to the school in return for a term-based operating contract.

Where a school persistently cannot deliver learning results for its students, the state agency partners with parent and family leaders, other community leaders, the local school board, and school leadership in a process of review and reset. The group will jointly select the next step for the school, chosen from a state-curated list of options: closure; vouchers for all students; transfer of school operations to a high-performing public school or network; or adoption of a full-school model that has a strong history of success in a school or schools with similar student attributes. If the choice is to mirror a successful school, the state, the school board, and the school will execute a term-limited performance contract that includes performance benchmarks and discretion to restaff the school as required by the chosen school model. At the end of the performance contract, schools that meet the benchmarks will continue their journey of improvement just like other schools. For a school that does not meet the benchmarks for improvement, protecting current and future students becomes the paramount consideration, and the school could be closed.

Finally, states will encourage school personnel to build their expertise in three areas: increased instructional competence, strategic management of school performance, and sharing of proven models and practices. State agencies will construct echelons of progressive recognition and rewards based on the demonstrated abilities of teachers and principals, which are not uniform but which can and should be cultivated. **The echelons complement the elevation of teachers and principals as true professionals on par with other elite occupations with analogous standards of professional commitment and expectations for expanding expertise throughout the career.**

The new approach to US public education will better align stakeholders and create environments of continuous improvement in our schools. The remainder of this report explains the new design in greater detail.



# CHANGE IS IMPERATIVE

The Education Futures Council is not the first group to examine our country's education results and reflect on how they match with the demands of the future. In 1983 the United States National Commission on Excellence and Education released *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform (ANAR)*.<sup>6</sup> Its assessment was sobering: our public education system was failing at its job to deliver strong academic preparation.

The report called for increased academic rigor, more productive use of instructional time, more effective teaching, and more impactful leadership. The report not only proved to be a sensation, it led to a wave of responses across the nation, including for a brief time efforts by the leadership of the American Federation of Teachers to enhance the professional caliber of teachers. ANAR would set in motion decades of policy and practice changes at every level of the education system, giving rise to what we know today as the modern school reform movement.

We stand on familiar ground in different times. The case for dramatic change is clear for all to see. Scores on NAEP assessments, in both the fourth and eighth grades, are at their lowest points since the 1970s; high school scores on those tests have barely budged in the many decades of testing.

State testing tells a similar story. Reforms to federal and state education accountability systems, which took root in the late 1990s and early 2000s, have offered the public ubiquitous

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Half of the public school children in our country cannot meet the basic proficiency standards set by states, even with many of these standards set perilously low.

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data about school performance. While there has been some concern about how these tests are used and what student results actually reveal about student learning, standardized state tests paint an aggregate picture that's worth trying to understand. That picture validates what we know from NAEP: half of the public school children in our country cannot meet the basic proficiency standards set by states, even with many of these standards set perilously low, as seen in figures 1 and 2.

This decline in testing results did not happen overnight. Declining since 2012, testing outcomes highlight persistent achievement and opportunity gaps for low income students and students of color compared to white and advantaged peers.

COVID-19 exacerbated many of these challenges.<sup>7</sup> Recovery of student learning has been stubbornly slow, despite large-scale funding and effort. Large numbers of families have moved away from public education entirely, and a sizable share of enrolled students are chronically absent.

As a nation, we cannot be sanguine about shorting our collective commitment to all students and families. We cannot maintain our quality of life if we do not reverse the declines of the past decade. We cannot succeed as a civil society if we do not eliminate achievement gaps for low income students and students of color. Facing those challenges is daunting today. Tomorrow looks even worse.

## The World Is Changing

The ANAR imperative for change rings even truer today. We cannot expect the current model of public schooling to withstand the array of technological, economic, and social changes that are underway in our society.<sup>8</sup>

Technological advances hold great promise for advancing learning but will require substantial changes to the status quo. The pace of innovation in science-based instruction, artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning, assessment, and real-time data analytics is already enabling fully personalized learning pathways. Customized, scalable, mastery-based learning is in sight for the first time in history.

The shape, composition, and economy of local communities are also in flux.<sup>9</sup> Population changes and demographic shifts are bringing new texture, opportunities, and challenges to communities. These changes and shifts will reshape the profile of learners in our schools, resulting in a richer array of cultures, beliefs, experiences, and assets. Similarly, local labor markets and businesses are experiencing rapid change, much of it driven by rapid technological change, which is also impacting community well-being.

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Technological advances hold great promise for advancing learning but will require substantial changes to the status quo.

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We refer to this array of technological, economic, and social changes as “tectonic shifts.” And they are all happening simultaneously. While we cannot precisely predict the course of these shifts, we can be certain communities will feel these individual and collective impacts in different ways and at different times. The way in which communities across the nation are impacted is deeply dependent on community capacity and ability to adapt and respond to changing conditions, and these multidimensional shifts are truly unprecedented.

High-quality education is the strongest inoculation we can give to those who will inherit that future, but the system that most students rely on is not equipped to provide it.

## The System Falters and Yet Resists Changing

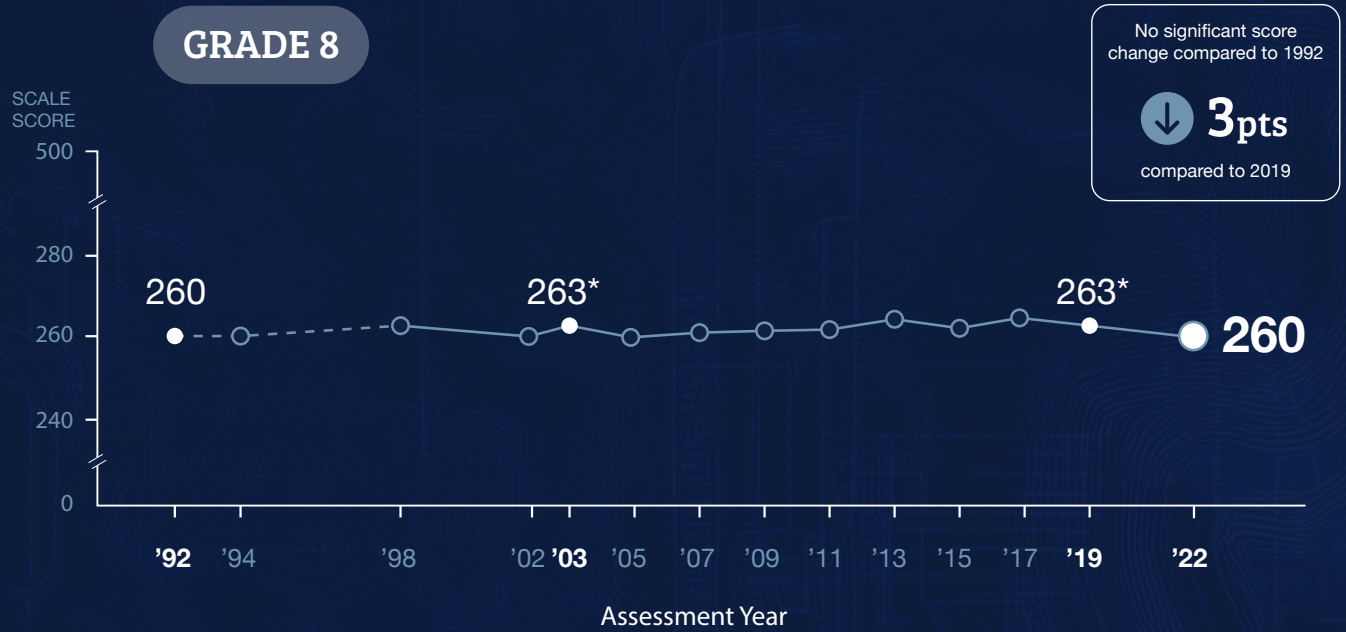
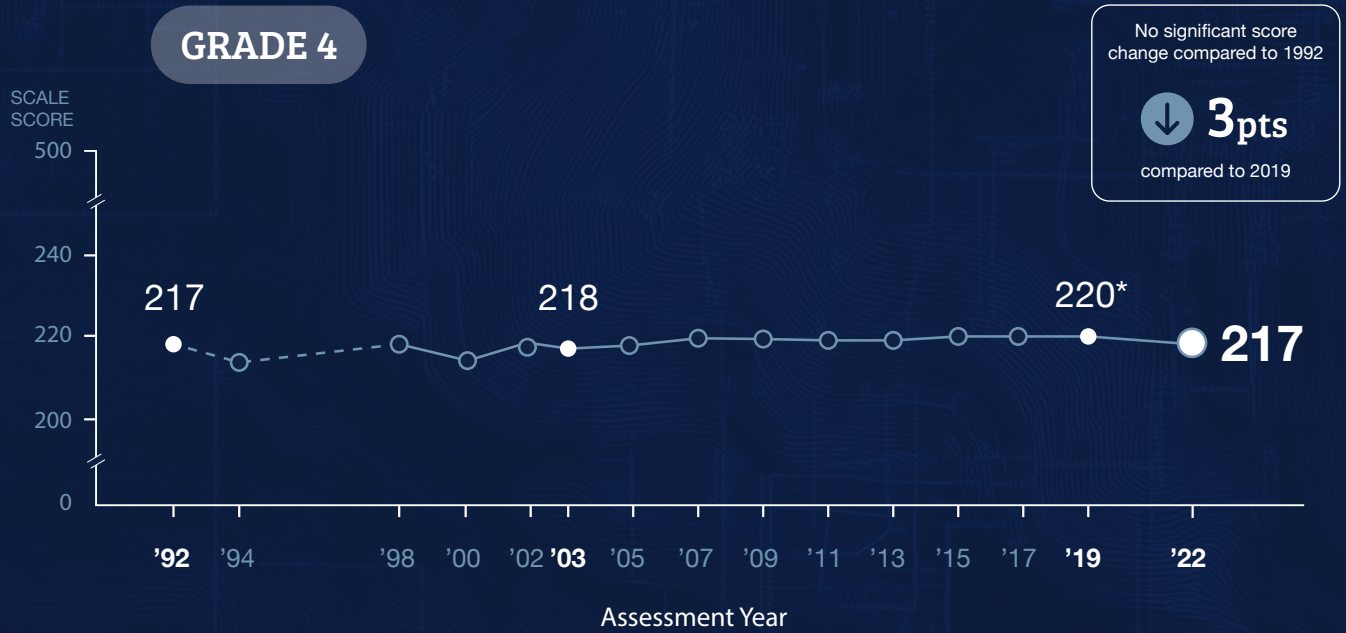
Over the past forty years, partly through enormous efforts to improve student performance, we have amassed persistent evidence of systemic shortcomings. We owe it to ourselves to take measure of the record, not to throw shade but to diagnose and learn from experience.

In recent decades our nation's educational leadership has deployed scores of well-intentioned reform efforts, some of which were designed to improve the system through direct intervention, while others were intended to apply competitive pressure through the introduction of school choice options. While there have been episodic successes in both categories, as shown below, neither has unlocked the kind of transformative, systemic change that is required at this point in history.

# Figure 1: NAEP Reading Assessment

Trend in Fourth- and Eighth-Grade Reading Average Scores

--- Accommodations not permitted  
 — Accommodations permitted  
 \* Significantly different ( $p < .05$ ) from 2022



Source: US Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2022, Reading Assessment, <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/highlights/reading/2022>.

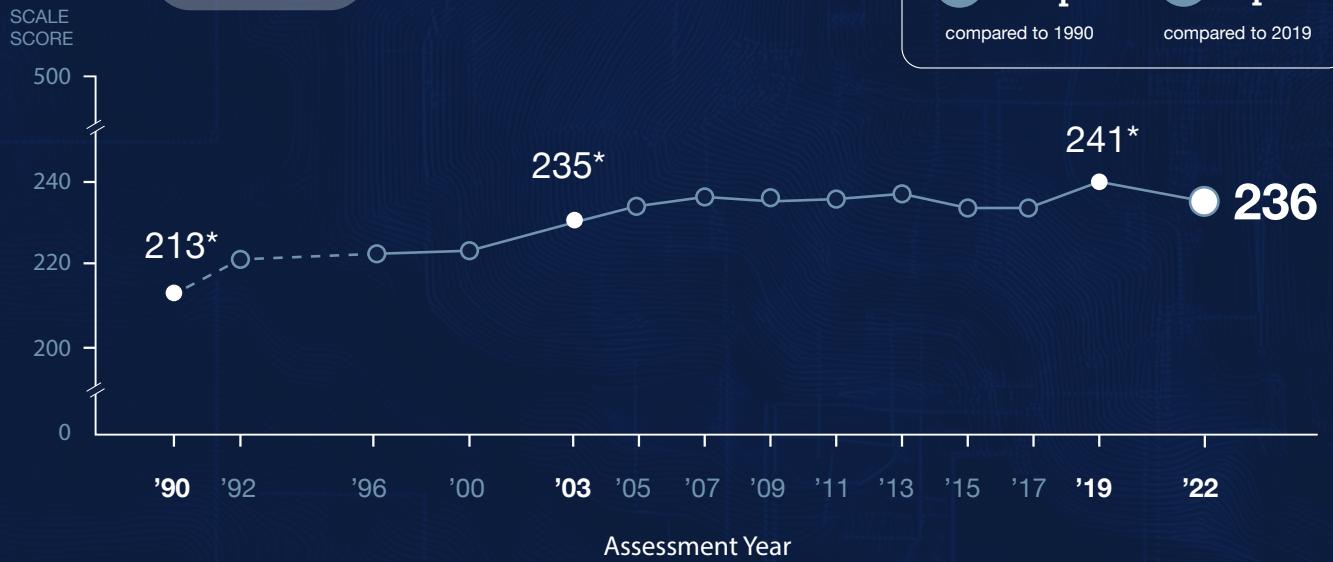
# Figure 2: NAEP Mathematics Assessment

Trend in Fourth- and Eighth-Grade Mathematics Average Scores

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 \* Significantly different ( $p < .05$ ) from 2022

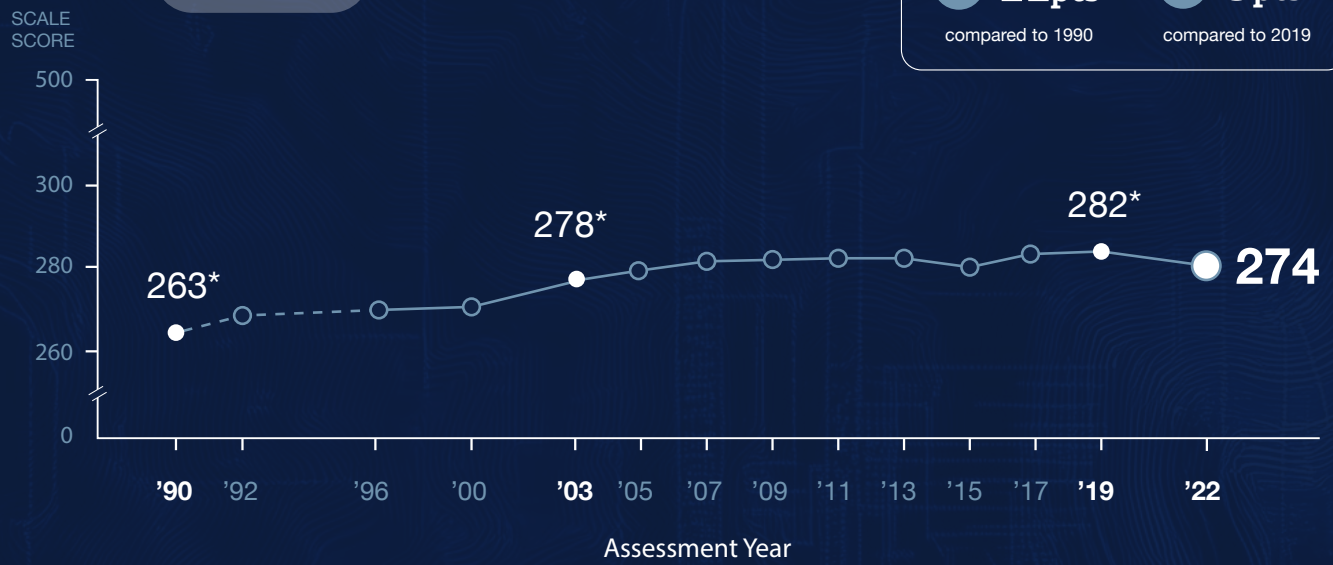
## GRADE 4

↑ 23pts compared to 1990  
↓ 5pts compared to 2019



## GRADE 8

↑ 11pts compared to 1990  
↓ 8pts compared to 2019



Source: US Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2022, Mathematics Assessment, <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/highlights/mathematics/2022>.

## K-12 IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS

### Learning sciences research

Newer and more comprehensive research on the science of learning—informed by the interactions between cognitive psychology and pedagogy—is helping us to better design schools and curricula, and to better meet demonstrated student needs.

### Standards, testing, and accountability

The consequential approach to school-based accountability advanced by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) made student progress transparent, including revealing achievement gaps between groups of students, which had a direct impact on student learning.

### Supports for teachers

- **Teacher credentialing and certification improvements**

Newer approaches to professional credentialing in the United States are borrowing from best practices in countries that have more aligned and sophisticated educational systems; this is a bellwether for a system's willingness to grow and learn.

- **Teacher professional development**

Recent evidence shows positive impacts from teacher professional development programs when they are strictly focused, multifaceted, and sustained. This stands in direct contrast to traditional approaches to professional development that have produced little or no effect on either student or teacher learning.

- **Performance incentives for teachers**

Incentive programs that offer financial incentives to teachers for improving student outcomes have strong impacts on student academic achievement. Similar programs that trade extra compensation for teaching in low-performing schools also produce strong student gains of similar magnitudes.

### School governance

New school governance approaches have aimed to reform or redirect the statutory oversight of schools. Efforts to better train school board members through mandatory orientations have been less successful than deeper engagement about purpose, scope of responsibilities, and priorities. New models of school board governance such as portfolio management and innovation zones, have shown positive impacts on student results.

## DIRECT IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS

The evidence for effective, widespread, and sustainable reforms is spotty. While there have been episodic successes—some of which we identify in the sidebar—few of even the most ironclad interventions either persisted beyond their initial adoption period or went on to succeed at scale.

A more detailed investigation of the fits and starts of the last four decades of reform is covered in *A Nation at Risk + 40*, a compendium of essays by a national panel of scholars and education leaders.<sup>10</sup> Its findings build understanding of what has been tried and to what degree the reforms succeeded. Not surprisingly, virtually every facet of the public education system has been addressed. Probing the general lack of success reveals some startling commonalities across the range of initiatives.

One of the primary insights is that most reform efforts were designed to change a single input or process amidst the larger complexity of effective learning environments. Modifying a single factor and expecting a catalytic reaction throughout the rest of the operation was typical of many of the studied reform efforts. Additionally, many changes were developed far from the schools or classrooms they intended to help, and typically lack any guidance or input from practitioners. Another insight from the essays was the problematic nature of rapid, short-lived cycle of reform efforts. Profound changes were expected straightaway, and many efforts were quickly abandoned to be replaced with yet another approach when immediate results did not appear. Rigidly structured reform approaches often ignored important contextual differences across classroom, school, and community settings, resulting in ineffective rollout and implementation. Finally, even when innovations proved successful, tepid dissemination did not lead to sustainable changes at scale. With such a comprehensive record across many domains of multiple attempts and poor results, leading researchers concluded that “the system, as presently constituted, has been resilient to reforms at scale.”<sup>11</sup>

## EXTERNAL IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS

In addition to attempts to reform the system from within, there are public education programs and policies that intentionally function outside the mainstream public education hierarchy.

A broad array of school choice programs was born of mixed motivations. The inability to develop and deploy innovations within existing hierarchies drove some educators to try something new outside of their traditional public school. Some supporters wanted competition from expanded school choice to pressure existing local public schools to improve. For others, school choice aimed to strengthen families' role in determining which education setting best fit their children's needs by expanding the

range of possibilities. Both motivations involve indirect mechanisms (e.g., competition and broadening pathways) to provide students with better outcomes. The third driver was more direct—it sought to build new school options with stronger academic results for families and students who wished to leave chronically underperforming schools.

School choice programs have delivered on each of the motivations.<sup>12</sup> Research about the competitive impacts of school choice on performance of traditional public schools is narrowly focused on specific communities but positive on balance. The magnitude of improvement varies by geography and type of choice program, but in most studies is statistically significant. Still, having a quarter of the nation’s students voting with their feet has not prompted either the scope or intensity of improvement triggered in other fields at much lower thresholds of loss.

With parent empowerment, polls show a large majority of families favor having school choice options, a finding that is reinforced annually by reports of oversubscribed programs and waiting lists for scarce seats.<sup>13</sup> Educators, too, have embraced new models, as indicated by the rise of microschoools and other schooling options, which are often led by teachers and leaders who feel creatively stifled by the current system.

The direct academic impact of school choice on student performance provides important proof points of possibility for the work of the Education Futures Council. Students

who employed a voucher or tax credit to attend private schools in general have positive or equivalent effects on their academic performance compared to public school peers; in a few cases, the effects were negative.<sup>14</sup>

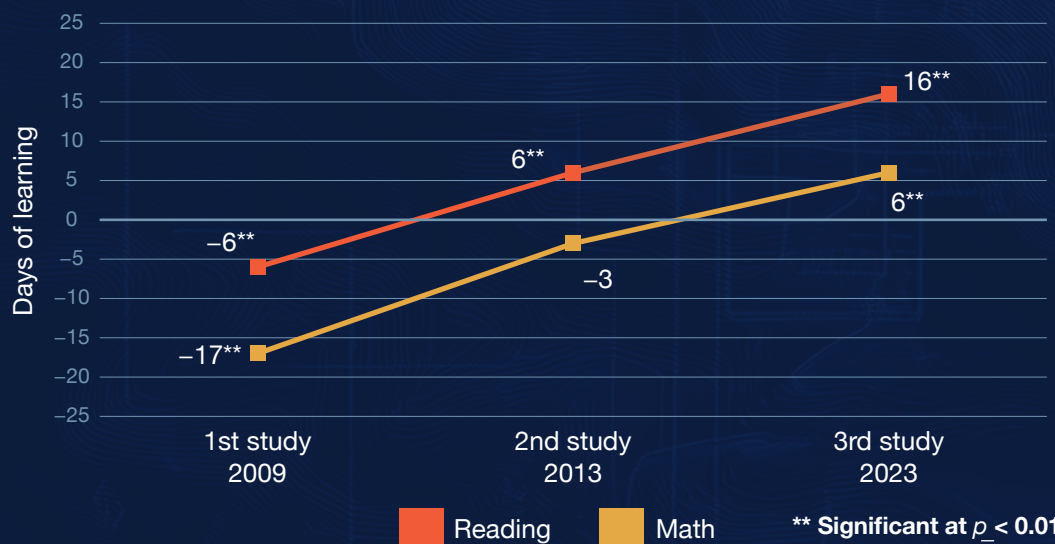
Public charter schools are one education choice option that has shown, on average, sustained, positive impacts on student learning over time.<sup>15</sup> We can learn four important lessons from their experience. First, the extensive evidence on the student academic outcomes of public charter schools shows that the typical charter school student learns more in a year than district peers do.

Second, a surprising number of charter schools produce above-state-average student achievement *and* ensure that there are no differences between advantaged and disadvantaged students. Hundreds of “gap-busting” charter schools produce these impressive gains, as do dozens of charter networks, scaling the outcomes across their schools. That so many schools, operating independently, could create these student results validates the idea that different organizations can be built that will deliver better outcomes for students.

Third, when viewed over nearly two decades, the overall performance of charter schools reveals a critically important result. As shown in figure 3, the long-term picture for charter school student academic performance compared to that of traditional public school students tells a story of notable improvement over the period.

## Figure 3: Charter School Impact on Student Learning

Annual Academic Growth of Charter School Students over Three National Studies



Differences in who enrolls or changes in the school mix do not explain the finding; the differences in results remain real across thousands of schools that repeatedly move their student learning forward in small ways that add up over time.

Fourth, the successful charter schools are not all the same. They evolve locally and take their contexts into account in designing effective programs.

Lessons from the external schooling options have direct bearing on the current effort. Programs that start outside the current system framework have less drag and are able to be nimble. **The experience with charter schools in particular shows that carefully crafted policy frameworks can launch powerful incentives that enliven continuous improvement of the sort we need for all public schools.** Finally, the very existence of choice programs is clear confirmation that changing the parameters that shape our children's education is completely feasible.

## What's Wrong with the System, and Why Is Change So Elusive?

For a brief moment in the aftermath of the pandemic, education observers hoped that “big change” might be imminent—that perhaps the pandemic had been a forcing event driving real change. The example of the broad reset of the New Orleans school system after Hurricane Katrina served as an exemplar that “big change” was feasible.<sup>16</sup>

But dramatic change failed to materialize. Amid ongoing uncertainty about COVID-19, shortages of staff and supplies, and increased partisanship and polarization, school systems struggled to reopen and struggled further in addressing pandemic learning loss, despite the infusion of truly historic levels of funding.<sup>17</sup>

Worse still, the divisions that always made school reform hard only worsened. Parent frustration boiled over in school board meetings, prompting calls for federal investigations. In response, a series of states passed more expansive school choice laws, leading to even greater flight from public schools.

Amidst all of this, little appetite developed for the kind of systemic change that the times demanded and that, even before the pandemic, was long overdue. **We are forced to ask the simple but vexing questions: Why is change so very difficult? And what's really wrong with today's system?**

In order to protect and maximize its own convenience and longevity, the system prioritizes uniform and compliant schools. A look at the way the system operates today shows how this is realized.

The American system of K–12 education is deeply—and simplistically—focused on inputs, not outcomes. Each budget cycle, we expend extraordinary effort justifying the expansion of inputs, particularly those that cater to adult interests, such as adding staff to the central office or procuring newly packaged instructional programs. Lacking a comprehensive perspective, we repeatedly default to a checklist of marginal changes, as was recommended in *A Nation at Risk*.

Additionally, the current system is biased toward standardization. This bias leads to the implementation of off-the-shelf models, even when local conditions, capacities, and needs dictate a different approach. The consequences of this habit are wide-ranging, including exacting an enormous toll on educator morale. Local teams of educators bear the responsibility for implementing ideas that were conceived far from their doors; then they are blamed for implementation failures, which may arise from differences in context more than from a lack of talent or will.

Educators are caught in this predicament, which has stripped them of their agency while asking them to make sense of layered, complex, often conflicting reforms that come down from above.<sup>18</sup> The natural instinct is for adaptation to the changes as they are delivered. Over time, though, the modest changes accumulate into big ones, and the entire enterprise is contorted under the collective weight. Without an overarching focus and grounding on True North, schools are forced to ride the hamster wheel of successive interventions, attending to the short-run demands rather than keeping a long-term strategic focus.

In short, our current system forces “solutions” into schools via an endless stream of regulatory and legislative changes. State education codes have grown in breadth and complexity during the last several decades, and resulting contradictory directives abound. In addition, the standardized, top-down approach is expensive: new mandates are costly to adopt, costly to codify, costly to implement, and costly to monitor. Meanwhile, the emphasis on mandate and regulation means that schools and systems prioritize compliance and its proof, leaving student outcomes and performance as a secondary concern, at best.

Relying on directives to force change assumes two propositions, both of which we dispute. First, it undervalues the ability of educators and school leaders to make good decisions. The use of directed solutions presumes that educators cannot be trusted to exert their own agency and make reasonable and responsive decisions. Structured guidance from above is treated as the only way to ensure that adequate learning happens in the classroom, or at least that nothing bad happens.

We have confidence that giving school teams agency and discretion can yield good results by looking at the school-level results in charter schools. In reading, 83 percent of charter schools produce as-strong or stronger academic progress for their students compared to the local district schools their students would otherwise attend. In math, the share is 75 percent.<sup>19</sup> The odds are good that teachers and school leaders are reliable agents in their schools.

Second, relying on top-down directives implies that other parties have superior abilities to decide, design, and deliver detailed structure and guidance. Crafting of mandates, legislation, and regulations takes place at considerable distance from the actual challenges confronting schools, and commonly without consultation. The practice helps to explain the expansion over time of local, state, and federal bureaucracies.

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Carefully crafted policy frameworks can launch powerful incentives that enliven continuous improvement of the sort we need for all public schools.

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This systemic drift is not just isolated to education, unfortunately. Similar problems of governance are found in other facets of public service. However, unlike in many other spheres, their effect in education has direct long-run consequences for the nation.

Any review of the causes of resistance to change would be incomplete without considering the role of unions. The influence of teacher unions in the current landscape is deep.<sup>20</sup> Unions for decades have effectively evaded formal ties between the activities of teachers and the impacts of those activities on student learning. Avoidance of student outcomes has extended to aggressive disruption of any steps that might illuminate the issues, including linking student and teacher data, broadening pay programs to provide bonuses for exemplary learning, or changes in seniority hiring or layoffs. Insisting on uniform treatment of all teachers doesn't do justice to high-performing teachers and perpetuates failing classrooms and schools. Finally, the political influence the unions have amassed with care touches every legislative body in the country. Ties with political leaders in urban districts are especially deep, with demonstrated consequences for failing to align with their priorities. The association of union activity with low performance in these communities is unavoidable. Unions could be a powerful partner in building a better future for our students, but this calls for adaptation to the exigencies of today's challenges. Absent new priorities from the unions, any proposed solution to revitalize our civic pledge to students and families with stronger education results will have to consider seriously their predictable response and plan accordingly.

Our families, communities, and educators deserve better than the status quo. If we want our system to deliver on its promises, it is time for a new approach.



# NEW FOUNDATIONS: THE OPERATING ESSENTIALS

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Achieving success requires clarity about the desired result. We must build a multifaceted description of student success with a broad set of student outcomes.

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Fortunately, our reimagining work does not have to start at zero. There is research evidence from education and other domestic policy realms for guidance. The new system can incorporate many current systemic components, features, and designs. The new design requires a few operating essentials, just like any other public or private entity.<sup>21</sup> It needs to set four core operations by which it will navigate.

## 1. ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS

We need healthy, safe, and orderly schooling environments that prioritize and protect the teaching and learning process from disruptions.

## 2. DEFINING STUDENT SUCCESS

Achieving success requires clarity about the desired result. We must build a multifaceted description of student success with a broad set of student outcomes. The COVID pandemic raised our awareness of the interplay of cognitive skills with other endowments, including socioemotional wellness, habits of mind, and durable skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, social interaction, and navigating of opportunities. The definitions should be SMART: specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timely. We have extensive experience with academic indicators and metrics; other outcome areas may need reliable measures to be created or refined.



Since all schools will be held to these outcomes, they need to be set and periodically reviewed by a higher authority. States already have policy leaders in state boards of education or state education agencies (SEAs) that can lead the production of outcomes and indicators.

### 3. REGULAR ARM’S-LENGTH EVALUATION OF STUDENT PERFORMANCE

Improvement of performance requires regular reviews of student status, using the chosen indicators and metrics. School teams benefit from assessments that provide frequent, formative snapshots of student learning. Other stakeholders need less frequent and less detailed insight as part of their roles and responsibilities. Many new developments are underway in student assessments—such as embedded assessments and mastery frameworks—that will deliver insights about student learning in less disruptive ways. Further large-scale improvements using AI and machine learning will hasten even greater advances.

**The responsibility for managing evaluation operations must be assigned to organizations that are not directly involved in the delivery of education.**

More snapshots of performance will create a more nuanced picture of student learning, but only if they are organized in helpful ways. In many communities today, schools struggle with basic tasks of data management and analysis.<sup>22</sup> At the district and state levels, larger collections of data exist but aren’t plumbed for the insights they can deliver. The new system rests on more sophisticated data collection, storage, analysis, and reporting so that teachers, principals, and systems leaders can fulfill their responsibilities in the new design. In the new design, the function of data pivots from compliance reporting to knowledge creation. States must build on their existing infrastructures to provide integrated access, analysis, and feedback reports and provide economies of scale. We envision accessible Knowledge Bases that identify and illuminate proven programs, practices, and learning plans that are associated with the contexts where they succeed. We measure, in other words, not for measurement’s sake, but so that we may identify effective practices and subsequently identify means for incentivizing their broader adoption. A growing evidence base could help accelerate improvements in similar environments.

### 4. ACCOUNTABILITY FOR PERFORMANCE

The ability to course-correct requires regular comparison of current performance against benchmarks. We need robust feedback systems and accountability reviews for student, educator, school, and community transparency.

Committing to a broader set of outcomes raises an important issue for judging performance: How should the various outcomes be weighed in determining overall

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Many components of the Operating Essentials exist today but are not organized or utilized to exert the power that the Council envisions in the new operating system.

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performance? There is real concern that academic learning, which drives future personal and societal attainment, might be downplayed in the mix of other valued outcomes. While these future decisions will rest with policy leaders, a view of “and also” rather than “instead of” will ensure that the system develops the best-prepared students possible.

In the current public debate, this Operating Essential is perhaps the most controversial part of the entire proposal. It goes to the core of our current state of public education: What happens when students aren’t learning? People outside of the public education sector have a difficult time fathoming why accountability for performance is such a radioactive issue, while in all other occupations and professions accountability is baked into the work. If we are to honor the public trust of educating our children, accountability for performance is essential.

Many components of the Operating Essentials exist today but are not organized or utilized to exert the power that the Council envisions in the new operating system. The rest of the design draws on these core operations to set clear direction, provide regular feedback, and reinforce the core commitment to students, families, and communities. It also bears noting that the precise details of these operating essentials will require periodic review and revision to maintain relevance.



# A NEW SYSTEM DESIGN

The Council shares the view that the considerable talent and abundant resources our country dedicates to educating its youth can be organized and incentivized in superior ways to produce, recognize, and reward better results. Fully educating all students will require learning environments that not only empower student learning but are themselves powered by learning from experience near and far to accelerate progress on student outcomes. For this to happen, substantial changes are needed.

## Getting Everyone Headed True North

The new design starts with a crystal-clear picture of the endpoint in mind. Knowing what we want students both to know and to be able to do is critical to forging common understanding among all the actors in the system. It provides the equivalent of a “radar lock-on” to align efforts and drive action. Many states, for example, have advanced a “portrait of a graduate” approach to articulate academic and nonacademic outcomes for their students, and these could be further enhanced with the inclusion of habits and mind-sets necessary for student success. But such “portraits” ought not wait for the end of high school. What about similar portraits at the end of elementary and middle schooling?

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We have always given teachers and principals the responsibility for student learning but without appropriate authority and the necessary capacity to fully perform. Teachers and principals will need more latitude to fully do justice to the trust we have placed in them.

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Having a clear picture of the results is necessary, but not sufficient if the system lacks coherent alignment and integration. The new arrangement must have all parts attuned and operating to the same ends. To borrow an idea from navigation, the aim is to have all parties heading True North as directly and efficiently as possible.<sup>23</sup> Discerning and deploying the unique capabilities of each part of the system is needed for the right directional momentum.

## Responsibility + Authority + Capacity

The new design recognizes schools as the central site of action and change. With due respect for the learning that happens in families and communities, teachers and principals are in charge of the learning locale in the public education sector. Since local contexts are both complex and varied, the new system accommodates the use of different means to realize common ends. We reject the idea that variation is something to be wrestled into uniformity. Instead, the new design is geared to be dynamic and flexible, supporting and cultivating customization across schools, within the parameters of the Operating Essentials. As an example, schools may vary the time, place, and schedule for students, but all instruction must occur in healthy and safe environments. Likewise, the system will foster change in individual schools over time, with differentiated support and opportunities tied to school performance.

If we expect educators to deliver and maintain excellent student outcomes, school teams must be the apex unit of organization in the new operating system. We have always given teachers and principals the responsibility for student learning but without appropriate authority and the necessary capacity to fully perform. Teachers and principals will need more latitude to fully do justice to the trust we have placed in them. The experience with flexibility in charter school teams affords us confidence that staff in district public schools will be inspired by the expanded opportunity.

In turn, other parts of the system must respect and support teachers and principals as leading partners. The new system design for schools is shown in figure 4.

Increased latitude involves moving the “authority for learning” to the school level so that teachers and principals can respond to the needs of their students. In the new system, school teams will have authority calibrated to their performance, providing space to adjust throughout the year to better support student learning. The shift to local schools routinely having discretion will require other parts of the system to relinquish authority and support the new allocation.

“Local capacity” refers to the ability of teachers and principals to manage the learning experience and alter

it effectively based on student needs. **Strong evidence shows that most teachers and principals not only are technically competent but are themselves resilient and adaptive**—just look at the barrage of initiatives they have weathered! In the new system, principals will expand their roles to be both instructional coaches and managers of internal processes of performance review and change.

**When ownership of responsibility, discretion to act, and agency for change are aligned in schools, the conditions are set for continuous improvement.**

Creating environments of agreeable collaboration aimed toward clear results is at the heart of the new operating system. There, regular reviews and adjustments of approach result in upward trends in student learning. A virtuous cycle is enabled that will, over time, yield the outcomes we want for all our students.

## New Roles for Education Agencies

A priority of the new system is to free up school-level personnel to choose program or instructional modifications to help students learn better. To do this, distant education agencies will reorganize to focus on supporting local schools’ efforts to improve their students’ results.

Distant agencies will have four general functions. First, they will leverage their respective abilities to *achieve economies of scale* to reduce costs—monetary and operational—faced by schools. They will continue as fiscal agents to manage funding flows. Expertise in measuring and reporting performance is an example of a function that benefits from scale.

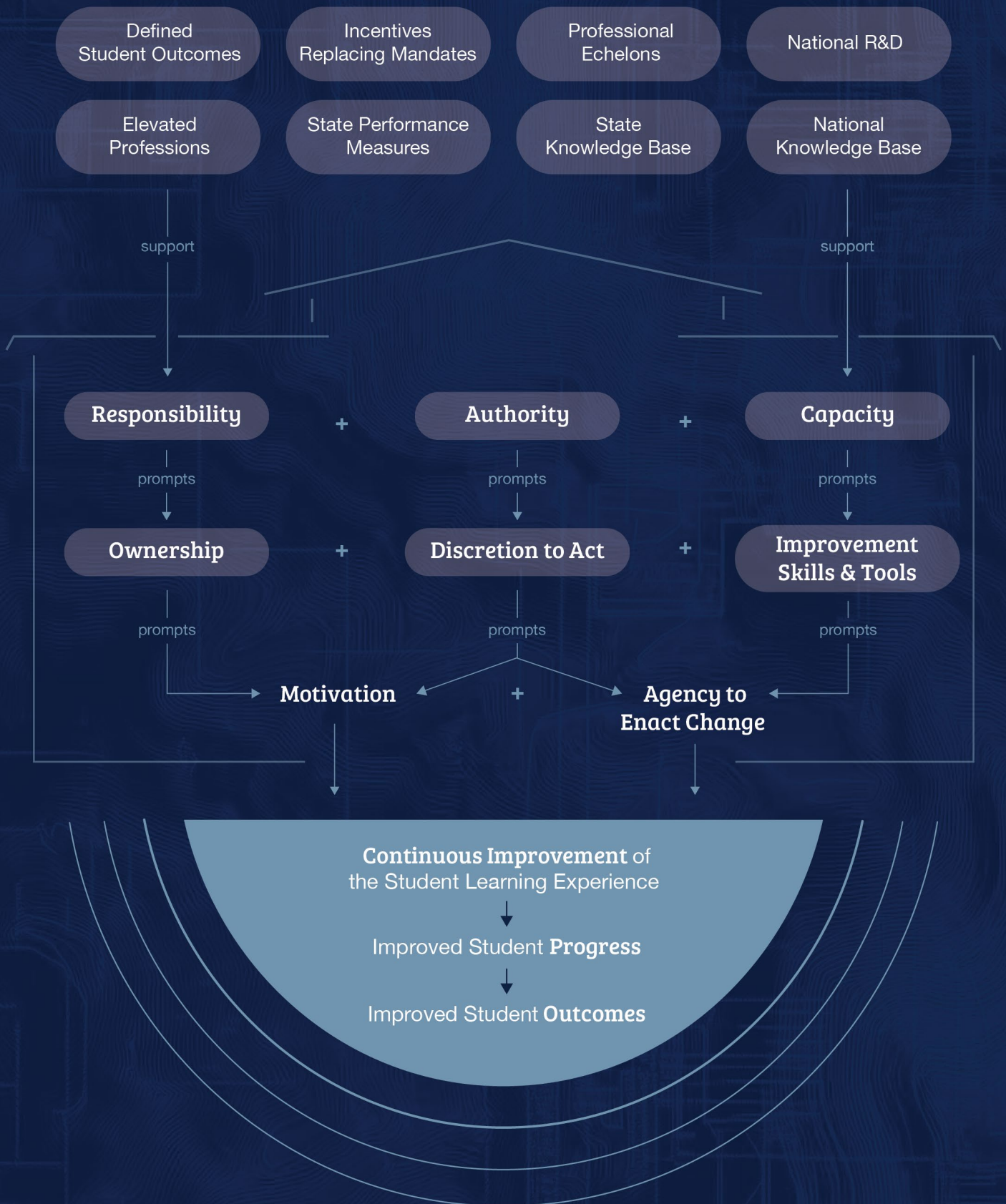
Second, education agencies at each level will leverage their field of vision to *create new evidence and expand our knowledge* about education. In particular, the federal government has a unique role to play in supporting a significant increase in education research and development to expand the scope of proven education approaches.

Third, making use of available information, education agencies will play an important support role in facilitating the local capacity for continuous improvement by taking on *translation and dissemination of current knowledge*. Building Knowledge Bases in conveniently accessible formats will accelerate the work in local schools to find new directions to pursue.

Fourth, the shuffling of roles and responsibilities includes new expectations for *minimal regulation and mandates* aimed at controlling the activity in school classrooms. The complement of increased authority to local schools is a release of an equivalent degree in other agencies. The new system favors incentives to prompt voluntary local change that aligns with the outcomes we want for students. When coupled with evidence showing better ways to operate, incentives can accelerate progress.

# Figure 4: Design for New US K–12 Public Education Operating System

Continuous Improvement in Schools to Elevate Student Outcomes



The responsibility of local education agencies (LEAs) for governance and oversight of schools takes on enhanced importance in the new design schema. Building capacity in schools to deliver strong student results calls for a new strategic partnership with principals and educators. For example, LEAs may offer incentives for schools to pilot mastery-based alternatives to seat-time instructional models, create “microschools” with a targeted instructional focus, or support regional collaborations to innovate teacher evaluations. Hiring and evaluation of principals is a central requirement, as is the disbursement of discretionary funds tied to improvement in student performance. Local education agency governance adjusts to use the lens of student progress and performance as the standard for managing personnel and outside providers. Aligned with their oversight duties, LEAs hold ultimate responsibility for the fate of students; if they are unable to effectively correct persistent problems, state agencies have the obligation to require changes.

State agencies also have additional responsibilities. They own the system-wide essential functions of defining, measuring, and evaluating student learning and outcomes

across all the schools in their state. Aggregate measures reveal the degree of improvement that can be expected in schools. State agencies will tie school performance to a progressive ladder of options that are available to schools (such as implementing a flexible staffing plan or incorporating new instructional techniques) and provide voluntary incentives to accelerate evidence-based changes in school practices. Where schools have persistently stagnant results, states will launch a mandatory process to correct the failures. When district school boards persistently ignore performance problems, states have the duty to impose effective alternatives.

## A New Professional Partnership

Teachers and school leaders provide to the nation a critical public service that deserves better recognition. The new design recasts the standing of the occupations as worthy of professional status and acknowledgment. Most teachers and principals today are highly committed to their roles; the new system design builds on and promotes these exemplary efforts. It also provides a path to a new professionalism.

In our rapidly changing education and social landscape, teachers and school leaders can elevate their value and visibility by making commitments found in other professions such as medicine and law. In those fields, individuals (physicians, attorneys) accept an overriding duty to mission, recognize the need to enhance their competence throughout their career, modify personal practice as proven alternatives are identified, and build peer-based processes to ensure professional quality and continuous improvement throughout the profession. In other professions, individuals play a unique role in the identification, codification, and amplification of best practices. While many of the steps needed to forge a new professionalism must be developed among educators themselves, the new operating system introduces competency-based career pathways with progressive recognition and rewards.

We can expect different behavior from educators under the new system design. If student results serve as the beacon, it is easier to create common purpose inside schools. When school teams have operating latitude because of fewer mandates, they can focus more on effective instruction and family engagement. They have the freedom and personal agency to modify models and practices to elevate instructional success, using regular feedback and performance benchmarks to guide the process. If needed, they are free to select proven context-appropriate alternatives to improve their students’ learning, including new school models, aided by local, state, and federal efforts to use their considerable stores of performance information to identify and share proven approaches from within their own domains.

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# HOW TO BUILD THE NEW OPERATING SYSTEM

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All roads in the new system should be directed to the True North pursuit of student outcomes.

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The new operating system for K–12 public education requires new thinking about resources, responsibilities, and roles. The Education Futures Council proposal activates the new system with four key commitments. Each is described separately below, but as shown in the next section, they have interconnected functions and operate integrally:

1. Organize System-Wide for Student Results
2. Flip the System from Top-Down to Bottom-Up
3. Minimize Mandates, Embrace Incentives
4. Cultivate and Reward Professional Mastery in the Educator Workforce

We describe the components in greater detail while analyzing the practical implications of migrating the components of the existing system to this new framework. It's worth pointing out that we will not abandon the existing system in its entirety. In fact, there are critical parts of our current institutional arrangements that, when reoriented and rightsized, will be essential to the functioning of the new system.

## Commitment #1: Organize System-Wide for Student Results

Student progress toward and attainment of a broad set of clearly defined outcomes must galvanize and drive the new design. This new architecture would ensure that student

performance becomes the lens through which all educational decisions are processed and made. All roads in the new system should be directed to the True North pursuit of student outcomes. Student performance results not only will be transparent and illuminated but also will serve as the primary reference point around which the effectiveness of programs, policies, and operating practices is assessed.

The magnitude of change that this represents might escape the casual observer. It will involve substantial review of policies, programs, and requirements within each agency to critically assess whether they are anchored in and steered by student results. In some agencies today, entire divisions exist that are at best tangential to the creation of student learning. Proving the relevance of existing programs to student outcomes is challenging but necessary.

Knowledge about student learning fuels many functions in the new design. One new element is the creation of state and national Knowledge Bases. When student results are combined with school and community profiles, instances of success in differing contexts can be identified. Instances of strong growth as well as absolute performance would be included. Deeper investigation of successful schools would be conducted to illuminate how resources are used and evolved. The Knowledge Base would provide open access to curated profiles of success that could be filtered by locale, community assets, grade,

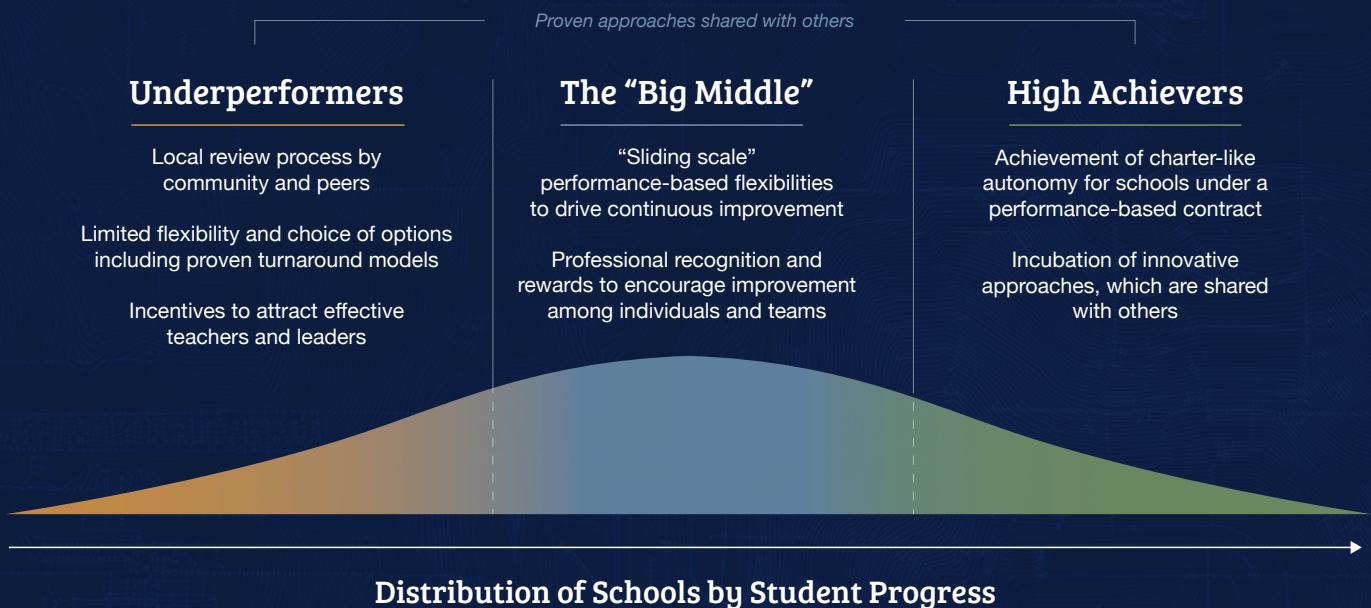
and so forth. These Knowledge Bases differ from existing databases of research evidence by being practitioner focused and nontechnical.

Student performance also drives the evaluation of schools as part of accountability reviews. A common framework covering all schools for monitoring and distinguishing school performance sits with the state. Schools and local agencies can augment but not supplant the common plan. The review looks at student status and period-to-period growth using the assessment results developed as part of the operating essentials. The accountability program provides public transparency for student results within each school by grade and student characteristics as a way to reinforce the pledge to ensure that all students are learning. The results are made readily accessible for the public.

Schools' performance scores have a direct bearing on their operations. States will use the historical distribution of school performance measures to establish performance tiers. Updates to the tier boundaries will occur at regular intervals to incorporate recent performance. As shown in figure 5, higher school performance opens more areas of school operations to school-level discretion, gradually expanding both discretion and capacity. Participation in extraordinary incentive offerings can also be tied to particular performance tiers. Choosing the number of tiers is an implementation decision but at a minimum should include the following items.

## Figure 5: Performance-Based Opportunities

All Options Geared to Building and Maintaining School-Level Capacity



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States will use the historical distribution of school performance measures to establish performance tiers. Updates to the tier boundaries will occur at regular intervals to incorporate recent performance.

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## EARNED AUTONOMY

Schools that are persistently excellent will have the option to voluntarily transition to a more autonomous status under a term contract (similar to those for charter schools). Participating schools would have greater control over spending, staffing, and operating decisions, with greater leeway to incorporate new learning experiences. As exemplary schools with this exclusive designation, they receive a special allocation of resources for their own purposes. They also have designated discretion to hold residencies or serve as mentors in underperforming schools. They can also participate in special incentive offerings to pilot new ideas or join larger networks of educators working on new instructional materials such as AI-assisted writing.

## ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

Most schools will have performance outcomes that are in the middle of the distribution, neither outstanding nor failing. In certain operational areas, such as curriculum or pedagogy, these schools will gain additional autonomy from their LEA as their performance improves.

## SCHOOL REBOOT PROTOCOL

At the other end of the performance scale, persistently low school ratings will be the impetus for state agencies to require a school reboot protocol. The protocol blends outside review and evidence-based, outcomes-driven decision rules. An independent review by local community stakeholders, state representatives, and outside educators, coupled with a community needs assessment, will be used to examine the school's performance record. These evaluators will join with school and LEA representatives to review a list of possible options that is prepared by the state, drawing from robust data, evidence, and analytics. The options might include: a closely curated list from the Knowledge Base of high-performing school models that are succeeding in similar community contexts, turning over operations to a high-performing operator such as an excelling charter school network or school turnaround entity, or allowing for additional school choice alternatives. Once a choice is made, the state, the local education agency, and the school will execute a term-limited performance contract and resources will be provided that align with the chosen reboot approach. The LEA manages the performance contract.

Resetting the focus onto student outcomes raises several practical implications:

- **Funding.** Some of the products and services described above exist in rudimentary form today but will need substantial funding in order to revamp for their future requirements. Overhaul of existing agency operations will involve short-term resource needs but is expected to streamline the agencies, freeing up resources that could be redirected to funding new knowledge-creation activities.
- **More nuanced insights on students.** Measures that assess student habits, mind-sets, skills, and capabilities are not yet as widely available or as trusted as measures of knowledge and cognitive skills; it is likely that the set of outcomes we choose will need continued development of robust measures. Likewise, availability of the Knowledge Bases and school performance profiles relies on formulas and analyses that still need to be developed.
- **Educator development.** Fortifying the ability to help students achieve academic and nonacademic mastery will bring new urgency to evolving teacher preparation and in-service development. Making this kind of commitment at scale will need to leverage the positive exemplars where professional competency, student performance, and career advancement are linked.



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If we ask educators and school leaders to be the agents of change we need them to be, then the school teams need to be positioned not at the bottom of the decision chain but at the top.

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- **A new kind of “report card,” or student record.** Comprehensive measures and metrics of performance, including those that measure student agency and ownership of learning, make typical grading and reports obsolete.
- **Robust student performance monitoring systems.** Many of our current assessment and monitoring systems are ripe for innovation so that school teams, classrooms, and families can get clear and actionable information in time to benefit from it. Filling current gaps may be helped by generative AI tools expanding on the insights of policymakers and practitioners.

## Commitment #2: Flip the System from Top-Down to Bottom-Up

Imagine a surgeon in the midst of a lengthy operation having to stop to fill out a state-mandated progress report; discovering that critical instruments have been swapped out for shiny, untested ones; or having the size of their suture thread dictated to them despite the immediate needs of the patient. We would think these scenarios preposterous but are sanguine about similar treatment in our schools and classrooms.

In the public education sector, we accept as normal a hierarchy that upon deeper consideration is not just counterproductive but deters the progress of learning in our schools. We have decades of experience with the current arrangement of federal, state, and local agencies exercising various authorities over schools.

A look back at the NAEP results ought to prompt the basic question: Is this arrangement of agencies the best we can do? We conclude that reorientation and repurposing of the institutional units of the public education sector is both imperative and possible. We refer to this new arrangement as “the flipped system.”

Our answer is motivated by four considerations. If we ask educators and school leaders to be the agents of change we need them to be, then the school teams need to be positioned not at the bottom of the decision chain but at the top.

Governing institutions that are more distant from the locus of change, such as state and federal agencies, should use their designated authority to *support* the function of change instead of trying to *control* the function of change. The difference between the two approaches is profound. The simple fact is that with each step away from the classroom door, the volume, accuracy, and timeliness of data and information needed to make key decisions about schooling drop dramatically. Policymakers in these offices distant from classrooms can’t possibly know enough about the unique needs of every child, family, and community to respond accordingly. What these entities can do, however, is use their broader reach, wider field of vision, and command of economies of scale to provide supporting resources to school-level personnel.

### SCHOOLS

In the flipped system hierarchy, schools are the apex organization. Classrooms are the hot spot, the place where human energy, resources, and processes combine to create learning in schools. They understand their students, families, local capacities, and local context through the unique lens of the school. They need sufficient discretion to make decisions in situations to manage their own operations and adapt their efforts to address the needs of their students.

To be effective change makers, schools must have ready access to trusted information on proven school models, instructional methods, course designs, student assessments, engagement strategies, and so on. Ideally, the guidance would include details on the range of contexts that have shown success so that school teams

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can easily examine successful options suited to their circumstances. But the tasks associated with search and curation of proven alternatives exceed school-level bandwidth and would be very inefficient if undertaken independently. Schools will remain organized under local education agencies in the new model, with coordination in the areas described below.

### LOCAL AGENCIES

Local education organizations, such as districts or networks, have authority over a set of schools but are one level removed from school activities, thereby reducing the amount of detail available to them. Their new role delivers supportive leadership to schools by ensuring that schools have effective leaders, and by managing important operational functions on their behalf, especially those that benefit from economies of scale. In the new model, LEAs continue to steward resources and manage a range of shared services, including personnel functions of recruiting and hiring teachers and principals, and devising consistent evaluation programs. LEAs also hold teachers and principals responsible for school performance in their individual career progressions, in line with the state system described below. Based on performance, they will also oversee the changes in site-based discretion of school operations. As decision-making and authority

move to schools, LEAs will adjust their internal systems to accommodate these shifts. Using local and other resources, they will actively research proven practices that suit local conditions and provide guidance to schools. LEAs also are best suited to devise local incentive programs to mobilize educators and leaders to improve student results.

### STATE AGENCIES

Regional or state-level entities can see across multiple geographies and districts, but their scope is even less detailed than that of local education agencies. This helps explain the challenges that many state agencies face in designing and implementing effective solutions for schools. State agencies are too remote to successfully prescribe programs that actually fit the vast variety of local contexts across districts. A number of states have as much as acknowledged these limitations by creating “innovation zones” that provide schools and districts with waivers from certain state regulations. This is a tacit admission that state regulations not only serve as barriers to innovation, but that the states themselves have little sense for which regulations are the most egregious, counting on schools and districts to tell them.

Instead, a better focus for state agencies would be on contributing what they and only they can provide: they are best suited to functions that require equivalence in all settings, such as standards, assessments, and accountability determinations. These functions also include assured fair funding; consensus on the set of student outcomes that drive the system; regular assessment tools for students, teachers, and leaders; common performance reports; and definition of the degree of discretion that schools can earn as a result of their student outcomes, including the Earned Autonomy and school reboot protocols discussed earlier.

In the new system, state agencies are freed from imposing detailed prescriptions on districts and schools but can play an important role in providing actionable information to them for local decisions. They can provide Instructional Commons repositories to curate evidence-grounded assets for schools to use as they modify their operations in the quest for better student results. They also can leverage their observation powers to sponsor incentives to address common challenges, such as talent turnover or skill deficits, with emerging tools or methods.

### FEDERAL OR NATIONAL AGENCIES

At the federal or national level, the field of vision is broader but shallower than at the state level. From this vantage point, it is easier to identify state-level variations in performance and to conduct high-level research to highlight, measure, and diagnose problems.

At the same time, distance from classrooms and communities makes it more difficult to account for differences in local context or capacity that are needed for effective intervention programs.

The federal solution to this problem of distance has been to deputize state education agencies as administrators and enforcers of federal law. As a result, the federal government, which contributes roughly 8 percent of total K–12 spending, funds the salaries of nearly half of all state education agency employees, and in some states well over half.<sup>24</sup> As a result, the bulk of the work these state-level agencies do is in service to federal law and regulation.

It can be argued that this expansive federal role is warranted given its unique position, and indeed, we contend that there are valuable and unique contributions that are possible only from the national or federal level.

The first is to provide nationally consistent measures of student outcomes, which is necessary to ground state measurement systems in an independent standard that imposes a degree of public accountability on state efforts. For example, the dilution of course credit or grade progression requirements in some states plays out in the state ratings and rankings. The national- and state-specific measures are also of critical importance in international comparisons, allowing insight into the places that exert leading and lagging influence.

The federal sphere of activity also is uniquely positioned to build new knowledge about success in public education. No other entity at any level of the system has the scope and means to build programs of research and evaluation that are needed to fundamentally advance the body of knowledge about effective strategies to educate our students. Greater insights into the competencies that determine teacher effectiveness; or how community attributes, attitudes, and assets vary or influence positive student learning; or how innovations to instruction or environments affect learning are all areas for large-scale investigation. Building and sustaining long-term research consortia is needed to produce rigorous and reliable knowledge. The education sector should look to other sectors for examples of success in seeding research findings into practice to accelerate knowledge transfer, such as the work of the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA).

Beyond original foundational research and development, having a nationwide perspective lends itself to creation of a national-level Knowledge Base about successful school models and programs. Ensuring open access for policymakers, education agency leadership, and local agencies is an irreplaceable federal function.

Other worthy investments include resources for states to promote student and school improvements such as incentive-based pilot programs, support for national networks of successful schools, or support for residencies or ambassadorships to get excellent teachers into low-performing schools.

There can also be no question that protection of civil rights, the assurance that necessary services will be provided to students with special needs, and the provision of targeted support for at-risk populations are worthy of federal attention and support. What is required, however, is a rethinking and redesign of the state-federal relationship, which would have as its goal the lifting of regulatory burdens and establishing roles and responsibilities in a clear and coherent fashion.

The 2015 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, called the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), is an example of an intentional effort to scale back the federal role, providing states with added flexibility in exchange for greater transparency and public accountability. Our proposed system reinforces this idea that states have full responsibility to clearly define, measure, assess, and publicly report on student performance and progress with enough transparency to explain how well learning is fostered in all students.

While we can't enumerate every possible role and responsibility of the flipped system, it's safe to say that programs or policies originating from governing agencies should be able to establish a measurable relationship to student outcomes. Anything that doesn't should be revised or revoked. In the same way that schools are oriented toward continuous improvement, so should be the agencies that support them; the grain size of analysis might be different, but the principles remain the same. As discussed earlier, the overall system design needs this common orientation to function integrally.

The immediate practical implications of flipping the system include these:

- **Funding.** Most of the funding flows will remain intact, though a portion may be allocated to discretionary performance-driven uses. Transition funding will be needed for agencies' reorganization. Reallocation of priorities in education agencies to align with new priorities will reduce their current size, freeing up resources to facilitate reorganization or fund new knowledge creation.
- **Strengthened role clarity.** The roles that local, state, and federal entities play in public education are not the result of careful deliberation. Rather, the system evolved over decades at the whims of generations

of policymakers at all three levels. The nation is well beyond the point where a rational reassessment of this arrangement should be undertaken. Clarifying these roles not only allows the system to better leverage the assets available to each actor at each level but will also lead to improved collaboration and coherence across the board, to the benefit of all involved.

- **Expanded knowledge-management capabilities.** The new operating system requires new forms and formats of information to drive the operating essentials and other facets of the enterprise. Increases in skills and expertise are needed to manage complex data and reporting systems, as are ongoing refinements of performance systems to ensure fairness, reliability, and validity.

### Commitment #3: Minimize Mandates, Embrace Incentives

Despite teachers being rated in a recent poll as the most trustworthy profession, the way our education system ties their hands suggests otherwise. Attempts to control local discretion have grown at a staggering rate over the past forty years, all the while codifying practice into a narrow aperture that fails to account for local variation and context.

Regulations are frequently designed to limit the possibilities of bad activities, choices, or outcomes. In doing so, they direct attention and resources to risk management, turning existing practice defensive. This in turn has the effect of putting a ceiling on outcomes by putting “safe bets” ahead of innovations.

The consequences of this decades-long trend are profound and far-reaching. It’s almost impossible to pursue real improvement goals if educators are frequently faced with new directives, which is how they experience the myriad layers of regulation to which they are subjected. The constraints imposed by mandate also restrict overall professional learning and field-wide advancement. In a world where mandates rule, variation is viewed as the enemy and a failure of implementation, rather than an opportunity to observe and learn how local practice might adapt to better fit contextual circumstances. Worst of all, the evidence on student results does not align with the growing regulatory trend, and yet it persists.

The way forward is by embracing incentives and minimizing mandates. Incentives are proven tools to promote behavior in ways that align with overall goals. Evidence shows that students, families, teachers, and communities respond to incentives they perceive as working to their benefit. Such incentives are common

in other fields, and in other kinds of less formally professional relationships, but they are strikingly uncommon in public education.

- **Financial implications.** Short-run expenditures to revise the considerable bulk of regulations from distant agencies will be offset by considerable savings in compliance reporting and monitoring throughout the operating system. Input from school teams could help to remove regulatory overreach and identify impediments to positive student outcomes and school improvement in general.
- **Cultural shifts.** Reducing regulation is a concrete way to reset the culture and expectations toward trust and personal agency. Allowing for voluntary participation in incentive programs reinforces the shift. Strategically deploying these programs to concentrate on areas where educators and leaders can strengthen practice to improve student outcomes further aligns the new operating system to True North.
- **Use of incentives.** There is great need to stimulate innovation and evaluation in classroom, school, and system practices and operations in order to improve student outcomes. Incentives can direct improvement and innovation efforts toward critical areas of need, such as supporting students far behind grade-level expectations, or adopting new approaches to assess student knowledge, skills, and habits of mind.
- **Leveraging the experience of sectors outside of education.** Other policy areas have long used incentives to advance important goals, such as carbon markets in the environmental sector, municipal licensing and permitting, and health insurance plans that prioritize proven providers. Learning from these and other examples will accelerate their use in public education.

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## Commitment #4: Cultivate and Reward Professional Mastery in the Educator Workforce

By a wide margin, the single most important publicly funded contributor to student learning in schools is the work of educators. Teachers and school leaders play an outsized role in shaping the future of society. Educators have direct, lasting impacts on the development of the students they serve, as positive effects of great teaching and great schools persist well into the future. A single teacher can affect hundreds of young people over the course of an average career, and an accomplished leader can ensure that all teachers are contributing to the school's success. Given the breadth of influence and the magnitude of educators' effects on students, it is imperative that the new system be laser focused on educators as essential agents determining quality and outcomes in the system.

It is important to acknowledge that our country is blessed with an abundance of dedicated and high-performing teachers, so any discussion about professionalism of US educators implicitly has a dual purpose. The first is to elevate the standing of high-performing teachers to higher levels of regard inside and outside the workplace. This report comes at a time when opinions about the perceived value of becoming a teacher and the prospects of teaching as a career are the lowest in decades. Improving the social standing and perception of teachers and principals as valued professionals directly relates to the ability to recruit and retain teachers, as well as positioning the field for enriched recognition for their contributions. The second purpose is to establish the requirement inherent in all professions to define and uphold high-quality work as the expected standard. If educators, individually and collectively, do not self-regulate performance, they effectively relinquish agency in both how performance is defined and who can take action in response to performance.

The treatment of professionalism in teaching today is markedly different from that in other fields. In other fields, status in a profession is tied to three requirements. The first is a high threshold to entry, based on mastery of a defined base of knowledge and skills. The second criterion that most professions embrace is the idea that improvements in the field raise the performance bar for all members. Every professional is responsible for meaningful skill enhancement over the course of a career and lifetime. There is a personal commitment to stay abreast of evolving knowledge in the field and to adopt proven improvements to knowledge, tools, or

methods. The third requirement is having challenging mission-centric performance standards that not everyone automatically meets.

The teaching profession fails the first requirement of a high threshold to entry in two ways:

1. The teacher-preparation apparatus in the United States has not committed to requiring quality criteria for teacher candidates at any point in their preparation. In fact, preparation programs are pushed by local demand for labor and by pressure from their own institutions of higher education to increase enrollments, both of which put downward force on admissions standards.
2. Robust evidence about how to develop teaching effectiveness or identify the variety of effective approaches is very thin.

We need interim and long-term strategies for setting the mastery requirements for the profession. New research is urgently needed to extend insight into the current constellations of teacher effectiveness, including ways to develop these capabilities and the interplay with different local environments. Another critical need is to conduct regular, transparent review of the learning impacts that relate teachers to their respective training programs. These requirements fit well inside the recommendation for extensive federal support of research and development discussed earlier.

In the interim, it is possible to draw on a cadre of recognized expert teachers who have shown demonstrable impact on student learning (drawn from the many programs to recognize, reward, or credential such educators) to build a set of challenging but attainable standards for gaining the entry designation for the profession.

The teaching profession also fails the second requirement of professionalism, which is a commitment to raising the performance and skill enhancement over the course of a career. In many professions other than teaching, every professional is responsible for meaningful skill enhancement over the course of a career and lifetime. That is not how things work across many of our schools today. States set minimum requirements for teaching certification and credentialing; empirical research shows that these minimum requirements are significantly below the actual skill, will, ability, and content knowledge needed to positively impact student academic outcomes. We need to reset expectations that teachers not only can but should excel, individually and together. The upside is that the quality problem in professional development offerings is known, and there are signs of growth in

the number of high-impact offerings. We can exploit the particular strengths of state and national education agencies to curate exceptional examples, support their dissemination to new communities, and further build evidence in new areas of training.

The final criterion of professions is having challenging mission-centric performance standards that not everyone automatically meets. Mission-centric standards tie directly to the central trust the members agree to uphold. Member performance is measured with independent data, sometimes sourced from employers or quality assurance providers. Those with outstanding performance are distinguished publicly, fostering acceptance of high standards and creating incentives for others to also pursue. Two corollaries follow this criterion: a presumption that professionals expect regular review of their performance with clear, credible risk of censure if performance is found wanting; and acceptance by members that justified dismissal is critical to preventing dilution of the rest of the profession. This criterion does not demand either heroism from members or compensating incentives for them; there are many examples of “quality first” expectations in the workplace that are accepted as fundamental.

Most states require teacher evaluations but seldom monitor the results. We know from multiple sources that many teachers receive top marks despite contradictory evidence from objective school performance ratings. (Such stark discrepancies are evidence of failure in the school personnel system.) Teachers and students both lose out when evaluations are insincere. Any impetus to improve is wiped out if nothing about results matters. The general inference is that the profession today would not be able to prove a pervasive, rigorous, or transparent practice of performance appraisal.

Nonetheless, the commitment to collaborative evaluation of teachers exists in enough communities that we can be confident that upgrades to existing practice are feasible.

Examples of effective teacher evaluation systems are available to leverage in order to provide a general template for voluntary adoption by local agencies or states. SEAs and LEAs could incentivize use of these proven, effective evaluation systems. It is possible to facilitate authentic evaluations to reinforce professional commitments and reposition school teams as the owners of improvement.

The three criteria described above create an ethos that membership in a profession is a privilege that carries obligations at all points of a member’s career in exchange for public respect, status, and rewards.

Given that the new system places a great deal of power and trust in the hands of educators, we need to reinforce the value of professionalism as integral to the broader

systemic redesign. As with other professions, building the guild and managing its functions falls to teachers themselves. Historically, other professional groups started at state or regional levels but avidly coordinated across chapters until they could merge. Those efforts, however, did not face the political headwinds that are likely to exist from government and professional associations today, so careful navigation and protection of the building process will be necessary.

State and local agencies must play a strong role in boosting the education profession, if the new operating system is to function as we hope.

New incentives for local agencies and school networks would prompt them to structure professional strata using the results of their mandated educator and leader evaluations. Progress to higher strata would trigger increasing incentive funding to the professionals. To participate, local agencies would be required to use a validated, performance-grounded evaluation rubric as described earlier and to commit to incorporating all growth results from standardized tests along with qualitative assessments. Distributions of performance premiums might provide changes for community recognition and support from engaged stakeholders. In schools that obtain Earned Autonomy status, an additional incentive payment would be given each year to reinforce the school team’s status and to encourage mastery transfer to other teams.

Educators might also earn one-time rewards for demonstrating mastery of new skills through proven programs or serving the community of educators, for example, as a chosen contributor to the Instructional Commons.

This commitment is designed to stimulate many teachers who perform well to claim greater personal returns from their efforts within the profession and in their workplaces. The tethering of effort and outcomes is already broadly embraced in practice; here the idea is to make that connection universal, supported by peer and system influences.

This commitment offers the groundwork for teachers’ unions to restructure their organizations in sync with the changes here. The design requires reorienting union policies about uniform treatment of all teachers, a practice that is increasingly refuted by the evidence and difficult to maintain convincingly. Continuation of their current practices and strategies will stand in stark opposition to the revitalized commitment to student outcomes prompted by this proposal. Union reform would improve their longer-run ability to serve their members, who will be better skilled, able to grow professionally and financially, and better positioned to attract stronger personnel to the field.

## Report from the Field

One local agency uses a multi-measure rubric based on leader or peer observations that is calibrated in reading and math to student performance on state tests. The rubric has been approved by exemplary teacher and leaders as fair and unbiased, backed up by periodic validity tests to ensure that all levels of performance are fairly treated. Teachers and leaders approved the use of extending the rubric to other subjects and periodically validating the resulting ratings. As new sources of objective measures of student learning emerge, they too would be used to augment and calibrate assessment rubrics. To guard against ratings drift, the evaluators' own performance appraisal includes consideration of how well their ratings sum up and align with school performance scores. The resulting ratings trigger tiered action plans that specify areas for further development. When the ratings are positive, the plans point to things like specialization or program leadership. When ratings are low, plans for necessary improvement include guidance and support from peers and leaders. Corrective plans prescribe required and necessary steps designed to ensure improvement.

There are many practical implications for new approaches to educator professionalism:

- **Funding.** Building new professional programs opens the window on the larger issue of contemporary approaches to teacher and administrator compensation and benefits including salary versus retirement payments; current liabilities for past commitments; and the skew in compensation by seniority, not performance. Start-up activities will include initiating new research in teacher competencies, developing proposed standards, building a consensus among potential members, and launching an operating organization. Private funding and philanthropy could beneficially be directed to the convening of educator-delegates to consider the evidence and build a proposed professional framework. Consensus building as well as organizational operations will require re-allocation of current resources or identification of new resources.
- **Hierarchy of educator competencies.** Multifaceted measures of student success will require corresponding new competencies for teachers and principals. Similar “vertically integrated” competency systems can be found in other countries and professions. These are topics for federal- and state-supported research. It is possible for specialties within the profession to build additional designations, as are used with medical board certifications.
- **Learning from successful comprehensive educator evaluations.** A growing number of cases of comprehensive educator evaluation now support careful review and validation across the country. Broader use of these tools can provide helpful insight about the scope and timing of reviews, the classifications used to rate teachers, and how the precision and validity of those instruments is assured.
- **Creating community collaborations to elevate educators.** Schools are nested within complex community structures, and local communities should identify opportunities to recognize educators as central to the broader project of civic flourishing. Chambers of commerce, local legislative bodies, businesses, civil society organizations, and social clubs should collaborate to build a suite of supports and rewards for the educators who consistently demonstrate mastery and excellence in the new system.
- **Building long-run resiliency.** The best form of employment protection is to produce high-quality results. The new system will move schools forward in building the educated workforce of the future and will itself become capable of responding effectively to external and internal change.

# THE SYSTEM IN MOTION: HOW THE PARTS FIT TOGETHER

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The approach we propose here is designed interdependently. Each facet of the new operating system deeply interacts with the others in a deliberate and coherent way.

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When a system is functioning well, all of its parts work interdependently. This is not the case with our current system. As revealed by the research review in *A Nation at Risk + 40*, when individual elements in a system are tweaked without regard for their interactions with the system's other components, even the most extensive change efforts can fail to gain traction. In the worst cases, the most entrenched and stubborn subsystems and components remain unmoved, while triggering unintended consequences in other parts of the system. For example, when states began mandating class-size reduction, the best teachers from lower-resourced schools went to higher-paying suburban schools, leaving a shortfall in staffing that central-office HR departments routinely filled with new-to-the-profession teachers.

The approach we propose here is designed interdependently. Each facet of the new operating system deeply interacts with the others in a deliberate and coherent way. Figure 6 shows how the parts of the proposed system fit together.



# Figure 6: System Components Interact

Success Depends on Interaction of All Parts Simultaneously

	<b>Operating Essentials</b>	<b>Organize System-Wide for Student Results</b>	<b>Flip the System</b>	<b>Minimize Mandates, Embrace Incentives</b>	<b>A New Professionalism</b>
<b>Operating Essentials</b>	Every enterprise needs to define and assign ownership for key functions that define, measure, and assess organization performance, which ensures common standards, measures, and evaluation benchmarks.	The details of the Operating Essentials focus on realizing student outcomes.	Better alignment of responsibility and authority across education agencies for ownership and operation of the Operating Essentials.	Local decisions should be supported and incentivized conditional on meeting the requirements of the Operating Essentials.	Objective performance measures drive career progress for teachers and principals.
<b>Organize System-Wide for Student Results</b>		A shared commitment to True North means all efforts and resources are aligned to the prime objective of student outcomes.	Realign institutional priorities to better match capacities to functions that best effect student outcomes.	Move from imposed directives to fostered focus and motivation so adults pursue higher student performance.	Teachers and leaders are trusted critical partners who prioritize student results; new frameworks inside and outside the system advance competence and recognition.
<b>Flip the System</b>			School classrooms are the empowered locus of continuing improvement; other organizations serve important organizational learning and support roles.	Each organization focuses on providing economies of scale and voluntary incentives, measuring student performance, producing new knowledge, and disseminating proven successes.	Teachers and principals receive customized evidence-based resources to accelerate their contributions to student learning, tied to escalating professional status and rewards.
<b>Minimize Mandates, Embrace Incentives</b>				Trust front-line decision makers as capable public servants; motivate with incentives rather than direct with mandates.	Build recognition/reward options with evidence-based pathways to motivate educators to higher levels of performance.
<b>A New Professionalism</b>					Revitalize career-long educator norms to be full professional partners in fulfilling our public trust to educate America's students.

Clear definitions of student success provide the means for harmonizing the efforts of local, state, and federal education agencies and for creating the common foundation for each to provide unique value. Local education agencies could offer shared services where necessary and move resources and supports to schools. State agencies could provide critical information about current performance on the student measures of success, while fostering information sharing through Knowledge Bases. Federal or national agencies could monitor performance across states and support research and development. Similarly, refocused education agencies can rapidly reduce regulatory overreach and promote constructive incentive plans for individual schools.

If educators migrate to a new professional model, we can step back from the overwrought systems that attempt to control their work, as the educators will have renewed intrinsic personal and professional reasons to improve instructional competence. The empowerment of these educators will lead to greater effectiveness, and the harnessing of their creativity, freed from top-down constraints, will lead to new models for learning and expanded options for parents and families.

Each component of the new operating system is influenced by the other parts, on purpose. None of the parts standing alone can deliver the impact we need for our children. If left to stand alone, each component falters. The components are these:

- **Outcomes orientation.** Setting goals around what students need to succeed has been a topic of both discussion and action for decades, but as we saw with “Goals 2000” and “Standards for All,” they aren’t catalytic by themselves.
- **Flipping the system.** Engineering the system to be dynamic and purpose driven provides some specialization, but on its own will not prompt improvement, as systems design alone is insufficient to achieve purpose. Earlier experiences with local discretion disappointed, but those efforts occurred in the absence of strong forces to drive student outcomes and the right professional ethos in place.
- **Incentives over mandates.** Mitigating excessive regulation might lighten the compliance burden for teachers and schools, but, if all else remains untouched, we could experience even wider variation in performance, as schools with existing capacity and resources might outpace their peers at an even greater rate.
- **Educator professionalism.** Absent a laser-like focus on student outcomes, new professional pathways on their own would quickly evolve into a warren of alternatives that, while novel, continue to give preference to adults over students. If overregulation remains in place, the drive for teacher-led professionalism will wither.

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Conversely, if any component is removed, the others don't function well.

- If we remove or relax the common definitions of student success, we lose the grounding needed for consistent and common review of performance, and in so doing forgo the ability to identify and promote highly successful examples for others to see.
- If we forgo flipping the system, the system remains bogged down in the inertia of existing education agencies. One-size-fits-some programs promoted by remote decision makers will thwart the ability of schools to tailor their offerings to draw on local assets in order to meet local needs, while curtailing educators' drive to improve their standing.
- If we avoid the move from mandates to incentives, the anchoring motivations of achieving common student outcomes to drive professional advancement will dissipate, and regulatory compliance will gain priority over instructional improvement, perhaps even quashing the ability to make change.
- If we nix the new professionalism, the remaining elements will push teachers and leaders to resist recentering their efforts on student outcomes. This may result in exploitation of the latitude afforded by relaxed regulation.

In other words, this report is not an à la carte menu from which policymakers should pick and choose. We are proposing a comprehensive operating system, and we can't install part of it and expect results. The proposal of the Education Futures Council requires a broad attack in order for it to be successful. The parts of the operating system are built to fit and work together. Staggered adoption risks triggering the all-too-familiar resistance and functional failure, long before the full model is given the chance it needs to breathe and flourish.

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## CONCLUSION

In the two and a half centuries since our country's founding, few innovations have been as consequential as the expansion of free, compulsory public education. Early American leaders understood the creation of such a system to be the linchpin of an educated populace, and of representative democracy itself.

Our risk as a nation is even more critical than in 1983 when *A Nation at Risk* sounded the alarm. We have lost our bearings, and our children continue to pay the price for our failures.

Because of the magnitude of that risk, we're putting a stake in the ground. We need a new operating system now, and that system must be designed and oriented around our True North: student outcomes.

Sustained, deep improvement will not happen by focusing only on a subset of the system or going all-in on one aspect or element. Improvement happens by sustaining a series of small wins throughout the system. This is what creates and feeds conditions for change. This is what retrains and reorients the underlying conditions, behaviors, incentives, resources, and work of the system. The Operating Essentials and systems commitments outlined in this report highlight

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that, at this critical juncture, skill building must be matched with will building. We must collectively build the will to orient toward True North and do that immediately.

Importantly, we have many of the needed elements already in hand. By not ensuring effective system operations, we are hobbling the strong human potential in our educators and agency teams.

We do not claim this work will be easy or smooth. Skeptics may think an overhaul of American schooling in the way we describe here is an aspirational fever dream. Others may be lulled into a false sense of security in thinking their local schools are the exception to the pervasive problems in public education. **We must overcome complacency by showing the dire impact of perpetuating today's system on all our children's futures.**

Fundamentally adjusting whose interests take precedence in educating our children will not be easy. We expect to see fierce efforts to protect and preserve the system that has drifted off its True North headings by putting other priorities ahead of fully preparing every student for a fulfilling life.

To those who question the proposals in this paper, we pose a natural response: What do you suggest?

We face a complicated set of choices as a nation. It's intellectually dishonest and naive to believe that there are only two options for a path forward: the status quo or what we've proposed here. Our hope is that this proposal stimulates others with commitment and imagination to build upon these foundations to create something even more powerful and compelling. We will gladly interrogate those new ideas with the same academic and intellectual rigor we have applied here.

When that happens, every proposal for the reimagination of American schools will face a simple test: Does this proposal contain a rational theory for ensuring a systemic focus on the one thing that truly matters, student outcomes? How well does it promote and sustain the public will and collective commitment to pursue the complex drive toward success?

We are united in the conviction that our democratic and economic well-being requires the revitalization of our public schools. This report presents a proposal to do just that. We want to work together with people of all creeds, parties, or ideologies who understand the urgency and are ready to act. We cannot spend another minute delegating the fate of our children—and our collective future—to the people who come after us.

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## Notes

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