

A JOINT PLATFORM FOR EDUCATION REFORM

ISSUED BY:

THE UNITED STATES CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

AND

THE CENTER FOR AMERICAN PROGRESS



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The U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the Center for American Progress have come together for the first time with a shared sense of urgency to address a looming educational crisis that—if not addressed promptly and effectively—risks undermining the economic prosperity of future generations of Americans.

Seventy-seven million baby boomers will begin to leave the workforce over the next 10 years. Who will take their place? There is ample evidence, documented in detail in our new state-by-state report card on educational effectiveness, that too many of our nation's schools and students are unprepared for the demands of the 21st century's knowledge-based economy.

Nationwide, only about one-third of 4th and 8th graders—and well less than 20% of low-income and minority children—are proficient in reading and math. Teacher quality is insufficient. Data-driven innovation is far too rare. These shortcomings are unacceptable and spell trouble for the economic prospects of individual Americans and for the competitiveness of the country as a whole.

We seek to develop an educated citizenry of self-sufficient, lifelong learners who have the skills needed to thrive in the workplace, today and in the future.

To keep America strong, we must take action now to reshape our educational system. Our goal is straightforward: to create the opportunity for every child to achieve the American dream. We seek to develop an educated citizenry of self-sufficient, lifelong learners who have the skills needed to thrive in the workplace, today and in the future.

This joint platform outlines a reform agenda that we believe will help us reach this objective. It includes a succinct but ambitious set of proposals, at once challenging to implement and vital to our nation's future. Working diligently together, our organizations intend to support these reforms at the local, state, and national levels.

Our recommendations build on a large body of research data, much of which is summarized in *Leaders and Laggards: A State-by-State Report Card on Educational Effectiveness*. The U.S. Chamber and the Center for American Progress collaborated on this new study with Frederick M. Hess, director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research. Our findings, a mix of the

surprising and the sadly unsurprising, indicate that much remains to be done before our nation's schools and students are ready for the challenges ahead. Along with bright spots in some states, the report card shows that many states lack the flexibility in management and policy that they need to get better academic results; that a large number of states are not doing enough to build a workforce for the 21st century; that adequate data to guide improvement—and to give credible evidence of academic progress—are too often lacking; that many states are not getting a good return on investment for their education spending; and that lagging states could do much more to foster innovation and improvement.

Working diligently together, our organizations intend to support these reforms at the local, state, and national levels.

Traditional approaches to education reform have done little to improve overall academic performance in our nation's public schools. Despite steps to increase per pupil spending, decrease student-teacher ratios, and recruit a better-prepared teaching force, student test scores have remained stubbornly flat over the past 35 years.

Therefore, our proposals are targeted at our education system's critical unmet needs: for better teaching, for more innovation, for better data, and for better management. We have not listed every single valuable reform that should be undertaken and that we plan to support in other venues, particularly the need to raise state academic standards and the related imperative to improve science, technology, engineering, and mathematics education. Instead, in this document we have focused on the core structural changes that follow most directly from the findings in our report card. Drawing on our organizations' mutual interest in innovative, far-reaching change, these recommendations seek, in the words of the report card, to "fundamentally rethink how we provide education in this country."

We believe that the following reforms are urgently needed:

BETTER TEACHING

States and districts must ensure that teachers are effective.

We know that teacher quality has the biggest impact on student achievement of all school-related factors. Studies show that effective teachers do the most to help students learn, while the negative impact of inexperienced and out-of-subject teachers on student performance is also well documented. With 40% of teachers and principals eligible for retirement in the next 10 years, efforts to raise the bar for educators have taken on added urgency. Dramatic increases in student learning will require better teacher preparation programs, well-designed professional development opportunities, good working conditions, and the creation of nontraditional teaching paths. We also need to improve starting pay for teachers while avoiding lock-step salary increases. Providing career advancement opportunities and financial rewards are proven methods of motivating employees in every profession, and we are convinced that the same is true of teaching.

States and districts must:

- Align preparation, recruitment, induction, retention, and professional development with the knowledge and skills needed to improve student performance.
- Evaluate schools of education and other organizations that train educators by measuring the impact of their graduates on students' academic achievement.

- Reform pay and performance structures to improve starting salaries; reward teachers whose performance contributes to substantial growth in student achievement; attract and retain effective instructors in subjects experiencing teacher shortages, notably math and science; draw effective educators to high-need schools; and fairly and efficiently remove ineffective educators.

MORE INNOVATION

Federal, state, and district leaders must implement innovative educational practices and school models.

The economic environment of the 21st century is rapidly changing. New technologies emerge constantly, bringing with them the demand for new skills, and our education system needs to keep up with the rapid pace of change. The nation needs to experiment more with new approaches to help schools and students dramatically improve academic performance. Innovation is especially needed when it comes to tackling seemingly intractable problems like the high school dropout crisis, which requires immediate and intensive intervention in the most heavily affected communities. And our openness to new approaches must include efforts to keep students engaged and improve their achievement by expanding learning time.

Education policymakers must:

- Implement innovative education models such as small learning communities, early enrollment in college-level courses for credit, youth apprenticeships, charter schools, and online learning. So long as these new institutions and programs are held accountable for academic results, giving them maximum flexibility to try new ideas would most likely yield groundbreaking approaches that, when successful, could be replicated elsewhere.
- Research and develop promising instructional practices and school models aimed at students who are not on track to graduate. A prime target for reform: the 2,000 high school “dropout factories” across the country that regularly post graduation rates below 50%.
- Encourage schools to expand learning time. Extra learning time provides an opportunity to reinforce the relevance of the subjects students are studying and to keep them engaged and in school. It does not necessarily mean more classroom time, however. Expanded learning time could take forms such as tutoring, after-school programs, and experiential learning. These enrichment opportunities can be especially important for disadvantaged students.

BETTER DATA

State and local policymakers must improve data collection and quality dramatically—then use that data to make better educational decisions.

In some cases, crucial data are simply unavailable. No state, for example, can provide systematic figures on how many teachers are receiving performance-based rewards—or how many have been terminated for poor performance. In other cases, data are not used in a timely and effective manner. Too often, teachers do not receive the results of student assessments until it is too late to identify student needs and to create and implement individualized improvement plans. Finally, data are not always reliable and consistent. Graduation rates, for instance, are not calculated using the same formula from state to state, making it difficult to determine which schools have the most severe needs.

States must:

- Develop statewide data systems that offer timely and accurate collection, analysis, and use of high-quality longitudinal data to track student achievement and teacher effectiveness. These data systems should include unique and privacy-protected student identifiers to track individual students or teachers across classrooms and schools.
- Adopt the common definition of graduation rate agreed to by the nation's governors.
- Provide funding to districts to train teachers on the use of data to differentiate instruction for students who are not yet proficient and for those who are more advanced.
- Collect, process, and return data to educators and administrators in time for them to use it to benefit their students, schools, and parents.

BETTER MANAGEMENT

Schools and school systems must adopt sound management principles.

Successful businesses use well-documented management and leadership practices that result in lean, accountable, flexible, high-achieving organizations. Yet these practices are often absent in school management. States and districts are not held accountable for their academic outcomes relative to their expenditures. Nor are principals consistently given the authority to make the decisions for which they are held accountable, from allocating school budgets to hiring new teachers.

States and districts must:

- Hold state education officials and district superintendents accountable for their spending relative to the academic outcomes of students in their districts.

- Increase the authority principals have over budgets and personnel decisions.
 - Insist that education leaders implement policies that create greater transparency surrounding spending, staffing, student achievement, and other aspects of school management.
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This *Joint Platform for Education Reform* highlights a focused set of structural changes that can significantly improve education in America. Inevitably, some other worthy proposals have not been included, such as calls for greater access to preschool and for greater equity in how education funds are allocated and spent, both of which we believe warrant serious discussion. But by focusing on our four core goals—better teaching, more innovation, better data, and better management—the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the Center for American Progress will devote our energies to key reforms that our organizations are well positioned to champion.

Change of this magnitude is neither easy nor without risk. But the alternative of deteriorating schools, undereducated children, broken communities, and declining economic fortune for this country cannot stand. Our organizations are committed to the success and well-being of every child in America. We believe that our ideas will contribute to building a school system deserving of our nation's democratic heritage and capable of enhancing its economic strength.



Center for American Progress



U.S. CHAMBER OF COMMERCE
1615 H STREET NW
WASHINGTON, DC 20062
WWW.USCHAMBER.COM

CENTER FOR AMERICAN PROGRESS
1333 H STREET NW, 10TH FLOOR
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20005
WWW.AMERICANPROGRESS.ORG