



7 Great Education Policy Ideas for Progressives in 2018

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Education in the United States must be improved to support greater economic mobility. Those without postsecondary training have experienced stagnant wages, were hit the hardest by the Great Recession, and have barely benefitted from the subsequent economic recovery. All signs point to these trends continuing, so it is imperative that today's students are prepared for jobs that will position them to support their families and participate fully in America's economic growth.

Educational opportunity for all has always been a defining progressive value, but in recent years, as the economic benefits of education have skyrocketed, living up to this ideal has taken on greater urgency.¹

As America's economy has become more knowledge-based over the past several decades, there has been a hollowing out of the middle class.² In 2015, for the first time ever, less than half of American households were middle class.³ Real wages have been stagnant since the 1960s, particularly for those in the middle- and lower-income brackets.⁴

The modern economy has left behind the nearly two-thirds of workers without a college degree.⁵ Over the past 50 years, job creation has mainly been in industries such as health care; business and financial services; education; and government services, where a large proportion of jobs require some postsecondary training or college degrees.⁶ Meanwhile, the share of jobs in industries that historically have not required any postsecondary training has shrunk dramatically. These industries include construction, manufacturing, and natural resources—such as oil, gas, and forestry—and even they are increasingly seeking to hire skilled workers with higher educational attainment.

Job creation during the post-2008 recovery widened the gap between workers who are college-educated and those who are not. Of the 11.6 million jobs created during the recovery, nearly all—11.5 million—went to those with at least some college education and 73 percent went to workers with at least a bachelor's degree.⁷

While 36 percent of non-Hispanic white adults have a bachelor's degree, 23 percent of black adults and 16 percent of Hispanic adults—of any race—have obtained the same.⁸ Because black and Hispanic adults were less likely to have a college degree, the recession hit their families the hardest and the recovery has benefitted them the least. Black adults still face a 7 percent unemployment rate, while the rate for white adults has declined to 3.4 percent.⁹ As a result, racial wealth inequality is at its highest point in nearly 30 years.¹⁰

Though America still has far to go, pathways leading to high-wage jobs and careers that will enable workers to provide for themselves and their families are still important goals for our education system. Just as important, schools must support parents rather than acting as a barrier to work.

The U.S. economy is increasingly perceived as a zero-sum game in which only those who are already well-off reap the most benefits. And as the American ideal of a country in which economic mobility and opportunity are accessible to all seems to be moving further and further away, disillusionment with the political system grows. Embracing a progressive agenda for educational equity—detailed below in seven innovative policy ideas—is key to reclaiming the promise and once again putting the American ideal within reach.

Seven progressive education policies to revitalize the American dream

1. Provide a tutor for every child performing below grade level

The U.S. education system must dramatically scale up effective tutoring models through national service programs, fellowships, volunteers, and high-quality virtual tutoring. States should provide a high-quality tutoring experience to every student performing below grade level. In addition to using existing state and local funds, school districts could use federal funds—ESSA Title I, Title II, and Title IV; Education Innovation and Research; AmeriCorps; and more—to finance these programs.

The research supporting the effectiveness of tutoring is extensive and stretches back more than a dozen years. Spurred in part by meta-analyses published at the time demonstrating tutoring's positive effect on student achievement, tutoring was incorporated into the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 in a program known as Supplemental Educational Services (SES).¹¹

While good in theory, SES had many implementation problems,¹² including low participation rates and lack of quality control.¹³ In some districts, there were scandals involving providers overcharging districts, hiring tutors with criminal records, or violating federal regulations.¹⁴ In all districts, SES siphoned off Title I funds, leaving less for other important Title I programs.¹⁵ The tutoring program was eventually phased out as the Department of Education began implementing “ESEA Flexibility,”¹⁶ also known as waivers, and it was scrapped all together under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).¹⁷

Yet despite the problems with SES, the research base for tutoring has continued to grow. One of the many examples of great programs is the SAGA Innovations program, which trains and places full-time tutoring fellows in high-needs schools in Chicago and Lawrence, Massachusetts. Chicago students who received high-dose math tutoring gained more than two and a half years of math learning in one year. In Lawrence, the schools that implemented the SAGA tutoring program went from the lowest-performing in the state to the top 7 percent of all schools in Massachusetts.¹⁸

A 2011 paper that investigated the effects of tutoring provided by teachers found that students who received tutoring in either reading or math performed significantly better on the state standardized test than a control group of students with similar prior scores who did not receive tutoring.¹⁹ Even when programs are less structured and instruction is not provided by trained teachers, tutoring can have a notable effect on student performance. In one study, students tutored by minimally trained community volunteers increased their grades and were more likely to pass their classes.²⁰ And many studies have demonstrated the positive academic effects of peer tutoring, where students are tutored by classmates or older students.²¹

The research results on the effectiveness of tutoring make intuitive sense. High-quality tutoring can meet each student at his or her individual level,²² a level of differentiation that is impossible for even the most dedicated of teachers to provide.²³ Essentially, every student with an educated, engaged parent has access to one-on-one tutoring at home, which is perhaps one of the reasons why homework compounds the advantages enjoyed by middle-class children.²⁴ For students who, for a variety of reasons, may not have access to that kind of academic assistance at home, receiving more tailored instruction from their schools can help to level the playing field and close achievement gaps.²⁵

In addition to the academic benefits of tutoring, there are social-emotional ones as well. Research has shown that developing a close relationship with a role model is an important determinant of engagement in school, and a tutor that a student sees regularly can provide such a relationship.²⁶

To reap the benefits of tutoring but avoid the problems of SES, tutoring initiatives should grow from the ground up rather than as a result of a blanket mandate. Piloting and then a paced scaling of programs such as SAGA could ensure that tutoring programs work with local school communities instead of burdening already limited resources. In order to contain the costs of tutoring, tutors could be found and compensated by recruiting community volunteers, undergraduates interested in teaching careers, recent college graduates, or through the expansion of AmeriCorps. Teachers who want to participate could also be reimbursed for their additional time.

Another way to contain costs would be through appropriate use of computer-based tutoring. There is evidence that computer-based tutoring can yield results similar to one-on-one tutoring in certain subjects, such as science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields,²⁷ or when certain principles of the cognitive science of learning—

such as self-explanation—are embedded in the program or software.²⁸ While these programs cannot replace the need for human interaction and relationships, they may be effective for some students and allow for greater targeting of resources toward students who most need traditional one-on-one tutoring.

Since it is known that receiving low grades in elementary school is a predictive factor for dropping out during middle school and that receiving more than one failing grade in a core academic course during ninth grade is a predictive factor for dropping out during high school, tutoring can make a difference.²⁹ Providing access to tutoring to improve students' grades before they are at risk for dropping out could help them to complete further schooling, which, in turn, increases their likelihood of finding employment and earning a family-sustaining salary in adulthood.

2. Offer free breakfast and lunch for all students, regardless of income

Though the school lunch program currently intends to provide meals for low-income students who need it most, stigma and shame prevent many students—particularly at the high school level—from accessing these meals, which is especially troubling since childhood hunger is still a pressing concern across the nation. Providing a healthy, nutritious breakfast and lunch to all students regardless of income would solve problems of access and also make the lives of all working families easier.

Forty-one million Americans, including 13 million children, do not reliably have enough food to eat.³⁰ Meeting all children's nutritional needs could keep students healthier, which would keep them at school and support their learning while there.

It is not always obvious who is experiencing hunger, and the face of hunger in America is changing. While it remains most acute in urban core neighborhoods with intergenerational poverty,³¹ hunger is increasing in suburban locales and is most prevalent in rural Southern locales.³² Since wages have been stagnant or eroding in many industries, two-thirds of families experiencing food insecurity have at least one working adult, and many might initially appear to be maintaining a middle-class lifestyle.³³

Children who are hungry are less healthy; they experience more colds and stomach aches and have a greater likelihood of chronic health problems. They also experience mental health consequences such as chronic stress and anxiety because persistent hunger sends the body's stress management system into overdrive.³⁴ Unsurprisingly, these children's learning and academic achievement also suffer.³⁵ The reverse is also true: When children have access to healthy lunches, they perform better in school.³⁶ Even families that have the means to feed their households may not have access to nutritious, healthy foods, and access to these foods is associated with lower risk of obesity and greater fruit and vegetable consumption.³⁷

Of households that experience food insecurity, less than two-thirds participate in one of the main federal anti-hunger programs: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); the National School Lunch Program; or the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC).³⁸ In part, this is because many food insecure households are not eligible for nutrition assistance or because certain barriers exist, such as the stigma associated with participating in programs designed to benefit low-income families.

Moreover, this stigma can be exacerbated by school policies. For example, there have been instances of schools refusing to give the regular hot meals to students in the free and reduced-price lunch program or forcing them to get in a separate line.³⁹ Worse is the abhorrent practice of “lunch shaming,” where schools publicly call out students for their parents’ unpaid lunch bills, for example, by marking their hands to embarrass them or even by throwing away their lunches.⁴⁰ The stigma of free lunch can feel especially strong for high school students—one reason they currently utilize the program at low rates.⁴¹ This is worrisome since in very low-income families, despite the fact that adolescents have the greatest calorie needs of any age group,⁴² teens sometimes forgo food at home in order to ensure that younger siblings have enough to eat.⁴³

Expanding the federal school breakfast and lunch program in order to provide free meals to all students—including in the summer months—would reduce childhood hunger and improve children’s health and academic outcomes. For states and localities where universal access is unrealistic, an expansion of the community eligibility program, which allows schools and districts in low-income areas to serve free breakfast and lunch to all students without collecting applications, would be an interim step to consider.⁴⁴ Making free meals universal would ensure that all students experiencing food insecurity have access to healthy, nutritious meals; end the stigma surrounding school lunch; and eliminate administrative barriers to accessing the program. All families—even those who could otherwise afford lunch—would benefit from this change. For instance, having healthy lunch options at school would alleviate the worry of packing lunch or parsing out lunch money on busy mornings. Absent federal action, states could embrace this policy by supplementing federal funds with state dollars in order to implement a universal school meal program.

3. Ensure opportunities to combine college preparatory academics with technical training and workplace experience

To be prepared for the jobs of the complex, dynamic, and rapidly globalizing future, all students should have access to opportunities to learn firsthand how their academic work applies to potential career paths and vice versa. Programs that allow for this exposure and provide students with a tangible outcome—such as college credit or professional certification—should be available in every district.

Not every student has the same academic needs, interests, and goals, but many schools still offer courses and provide instruction that treat students as if they are the same. Far too many schools are not preparing students for the world which they will enter after their K-12 education, instead relying on sit-and-get direct instruction and leaving students feeling disengaged from the real-world contextual challenges that they will eventually face. With each passing day, technology advances in previously inconceivable ways; climate change alters coastal lines; distant wars and international trade shape relationships with foreign governments. All of this has enormous effect on America's increasingly global economy. Yet many high schools are not preparing students for any of these realities or for professional experiences that could help them get jobs upon graduation.⁴⁵

Preparing students to confront and contribute to a rapidly changing world beyond their K-12 schooling means providing coursework that addresses these challenges; allows students the space to uncover and express their interests; and then provides them with the necessary resources to tailor their educational experiences to those interests. Many schools are redesigning the high school experience by implementing various models, such as career and technical education (CTE); personalized learning, apprenticeships; early college and dual enrollment; and language immersion programs—all of which can work for students' individual needs.

CTE and dual enrollment programs, specifically, provide students with options for coursework that will best meet their postsecondary and career goals. Under the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act of 2006, states are provided with funding to develop the technical skills of secondary and postsecondary students who elect to enroll in CTE programs.⁴⁶ Currently, 12.5 million high school and college students are enrolled in CTE programs.⁴⁷ These programs help keep students in school; the graduation rate of CTE students is about 90 percent, 15 percentage points higher than the national average.⁴⁸ However, research on their effectiveness is still in the preliminary stages.⁴⁹ The best and most effective CTE programs are linked to and supported by local business or industry; provide real-world experiences or work opportunities; give students tangible outcomes such as an industry credential or college credit; and create pathways for pursuing college or career after graduation.⁵⁰

Programs such as Linked Learning, which according to its website, “integrates rigorous academics that meet college-ready standards with sequenced, high-quality career-technical education, work-based learning, and supports to help students stay on track,” have seen positive outcomes for students.⁵¹ A seven-year longitudinal study comparing students who participated in Linked Learning to those who did not showed that the program completers were less likely to drop out and more likely to graduate from high school. Linked Learning students also reported better jobs that were more likely to offer paid vacation, sick time, and health insurance. Black students who completed the program were also more likely than their traditional high school peers to enroll in a four-year college.⁵²

Another example of a program that successfully combines academic and real-world experiences comes from DuVal High School in Maryland. There, students are enrolled in an aerospace engineering and aviation technology course in partnership with NASA and the College Park Aviation Museum, giving them exposure to exciting career options.⁵³ Another innovative program is the Washington Leadership Academy in Washington, D.C., which uses a combination of individualized online courses, project-based learning, and in-person classes, which are rooted in various forms of technology, such as virtual reality and coding, to inspire students to make new advances in the tech world.⁵⁴

In order to increase the number of schools willing to experiment with such programs, states should incentivize school districts by creating or expanding grant programs that offer flexibility for students to learn outside of traditional school hours and beyond school buildings. States should also provide additional funding for apprenticeships and use grant programs to incentivize districts to form partnerships with local employers to offer summer internships or a semester of credit. Blending traditional instruction with advanced postsecondary courses and real-world career preparation prepares high school students for their next steps and helps them gain practical skills in growing fields.

States should also seek to study and authorize charter schools that promote innovative high school designs with quality control systems in place or establish what is termed “innovation status” for traditional public schools. Innovation status, which provides a package of waivers to public schools to implement new school designs, has been enacted through legislation in states such as Colorado and Massachusetts.⁵⁵ In addition, states should reform their systems of graduation requirements in order to reflect students’ comprehension of material instead of how many hours they attend a course. Such reform could also require local school boards to adopt graduation requirements that better reflect college and career-ready standards and provide credit for nontraditional courses.

Lastly but critically, the federal government should increase its support for states in this work and leverage improvements to the quality of CTE programs through Perkins Act reauthorization. Federal policymakers should also allow for the integrated use of funding streams and incentivize states to target federal funding toward communities that are unable to provide these options through other means.

4. Transition to a 9-to-5 school day to better fit parents’ needs

The current school schedule is antiquated and makes balancing a job and child care extremely difficult for working parents. The federal government or states should pilot a school day that aligns with today’s work schedules.

Currently, the average school day is less than seven hours and the median school day ends at 2:50 p.m.⁵⁶ The average workday, however, does not align, requiring parents to make tough choices about their income, parental involvement, and child care. Nearly half of all U.S. workers report not having any form of flexibility in their work schedules,

and almost 40 percent of all workers do not even have paid vacation time.⁵⁷ Public school schedules are not based on student achievement but on an antiquated system that relies on two-parent, one-income households.

Between school vacations, professional development days, summer recess, and after-school time, most working parents who have school-age children face many gaps in child care and may even be forced to leave their children in unsafe care. According to a Center for American Progress report examining the largest school districts in the country, schools are closed for an average of 29 days each school year—not including summer recess—which is 13 days longer than the average private sector worker has in paid leave.⁵⁸ Not only do days off increase the cost of child care, but the short length of the school day also decreases economic productivity when parents have to take time off from work or when parents with elementary school-age children opt out of full-time employment in order to accommodate their children's schedules.⁵⁹

The length of the school day is also an equity concern. Only around 45 percent of all public elementary schools offer before- and after-school care, and low-income schools are actually less likely to offer after-school programs.⁶⁰ In fact, only 24 percent of children living in communities of concentrated poverty participate in an after-school program, although 56 percent of children not in an after-school program would be enrolled in one if it were available to them.⁶¹ Extended days and after-school programs also provide opportunities for students to encounter enrichment activities, arts education, and real-world learning that might not be embedded in the regular school day and that not all parents can afford to provide for their children privately. Access to after-school programs improves academic performance, decreases dropout rates, reduces drug use, and improves classroom behavior.⁶²

Academic gains, economic productivity, and equity concerns should incentivize the federal and state governments to better align work and school schedules. However, teachers, already strapped for time and pressured by myriad responsibilities, cannot be expected to work several extra hours each day for nothing in return. Changing school schedules will require new and creative uses of time, personnel, and money. States could incentivize a longer school day by compensating teachers who want to work longer hours and by increasing requirements on public schools' instructional hours. At the federal level, the Department of Education could promote the use of ESSA funding for expanded school schedules, encouraging high-poverty schools to use funds from Title I, Part A to pay for longer school days as part of a larger effort to boost student achievement. Congress could also increase funding for programs—such as Promise Neighborhoods, 21st Century Community Learning Centers, and AmeriCorps—that provide students with longer school days and access to after-school programs. Furthermore, the federal government could implement a pilot program under the university-assisted community model in order to partner graduate schools in social work with neighboring public school districts to develop a 9-to-5 schedule.

5. Support, train, and pay teachers like professionals

Teachers should begin their careers with an annual base salary of at least \$50,000 and receive supported training similar to that of a medical resident before becoming responsible for leading a classroom of their own. More experienced teachers with a demonstrated track record of excellence should have the opportunity to earn at least \$100,000 annually.

In the United States, new teachers only make an average of about \$36,000, and the average salary for all teachers is just over \$58,000—which, in today’s dollars, is lower than the average salary during the 1989-1990 school year.⁶³ Teachers make 60 percent of what similarly educated professionals earn, much lower than the proportion in other Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries.⁶⁴ Partly as a result of low teacher pay, young people are avoiding the teaching profession, excellent teachers are staying away from high-need schools, the teaching profession is not as diverse as it needs to be, and far too many great educators leave the profession altogether.⁶⁵

Lower teacher pay is not the only factor contributing to disinterest in or attrition from the teaching profession. New teachers too often feel unprepared to teach and manage a classroom of their own when they graduate from their preparation program and enter their first experience as a full-time teacher. Teacher residency models—not dissimilar to those in the medical profession—provide emerging teachers with an opportunity to experience for a set period of time what leading a classroom of their own would be like.⁶⁶ Many residency programs require teacher candidates to spend a portion of their time delivering lessons to students, but they do so under the guidance of a mentor teacher who provides feedback on both the delivery of the lesson and the degree to which the resident successfully manages the classroom.⁶⁷ An induction period similarly allows new teachers to ease into the profession with help from a more experienced mentor teacher. When new teachers receive this type of support, their students gain months of additional learning.⁶⁸

Teachers who are not adequately prepared to teach and who are not paid professionally may decide to leave the profession. Others—especially high-achieving young people—may never even consider teaching because of the profession’s relatively flat salary trajectory and because the professional work environment does not match that of other career paths.⁶⁹ Teachers have less flexibility in their schedules compared with other professions, sometimes even struggling to find time to use the restroom.⁷⁰ They also struggle to find time to collaborate with peers and often have to pay for their own supplies.⁷¹ To ensure that high-quality teacher candidates enter the profession and that excellent teachers stay in the profession, all educators should be trained and compensated like the professionals they are. Steps, therefore, should be taken to improve the professional work environment for teachers where possible.

Federal and state policymakers should make legislative changes that put an end to the huge gap in earnings between the teaching workforce and other college-educated professionals. To start, all teachers should begin their careers with a base salary of \$50,000. More experienced teachers with a demonstrated track record of excellence should earn no less than \$100,000 annually. One option for moving toward a professional scale for teachers would be a \$10,000 federal tax credit for teachers in high-poverty schools, which would close the gap between teacher salaries and those of other college graduates. States could implement a similar policy, with the tax credit adjusted to close the gap between teachers and other college-educated professionals in their state, particularly for teachers in high-need schools or subjects.

Teachers—like all new employees—improve their practice after being in the profession for a few years. Policymakers should do more to accelerate the learning curve by expanding teacher residency programs, clinical preparation, and induction programs to improve new teachers’ skills and by extension, their students’ learning. A new federal program could be funded through the Department of Education and administered by AmeriCorps, which already provides grants to residency programs run by nonprofit organizations, such as the Memphis Teacher Residency and Urban Teachers. States could expand funding for these programs in partnership with institutions of higher education, school districts, and nonprofit organizations; and they could use Title II, Part A funds to do so. States such as Louisiana have already begun this important work of leveraging federal dollars to create and expand residency and induction experiences for all of their teachers;⁷² others should follow their lead.

6. Create a safe and healthy environment in every school

Hire additional specialized instructional support personnel (SISP)—school counselors, school social workers, and school psychologists—to ensure that all students have access to academic, career, mental health and social-emotional support. By reducing staff-to-student ratios and carrying out targeted and schoolwide mental health interventions, students’ well-being and academic achievement can be improved simultaneously.

One in 4 children experiences a mental health disorder annually,⁷³ and half of those who will have a mental health disorder at some point in their life will first be diagnosed at age 14 or younger.⁷⁴ Furthermore, about half of all children will experience a traumatic event—such as the death of a parent, violence, or extreme poverty—before they reach adulthood.⁷⁵ And as the opioid epidemic continues to grow, students are coming to school affected by a parent’s addiction as well as the havoc and instability that it can wreak on family life.⁷⁶ In addition, as students experience other issues—such as puberty; family matters, like divorce; and bullying—having supportive trained adults to talk to in school is critical for improving their well-being and attention to learning.

Mental health issues such as attention difficulties, delinquency, and substance use are associated with lower academic achievement and attainment.⁷⁷ Likewise, experiencing trauma is associated with lower standardized test scores and an increased risk of being diagnosed with a learning disability or behavioral disorder.⁷⁸ When children experience trauma, it not only affects their own learning but also that of their classmates. For example, when a student is experiencing domestic violence in the home, the reading and math scores of their classroom peers also decline.⁷⁹ Researchers have found students in class with a peer who is experiencing domestic violence also had more behavioral infractions; they theorized that there were spillover effects that changed the context and culture of the entire classroom.

Despite the widespread need for mental health services and the link between mental health and student achievement, far too many children do not have access to this support. In a 12-month period, only 20 percent of children and adolescents 6 to 17 years old who were defined as needing mental health services received such services, most commonly in school.⁸⁰ This is despite the fact that early intervention is key to building resiliency, improving school performance, and reducing the risk of harm later in life.⁸¹

Even though school is the most common place for young people to receive mental health services, shortages of school-based mental health personnel are one of the main reasons so many children do not have access to such services. Major providers of mental health services in schools, such as school psychologists, are operating at ratios far higher than recommended, often with one person serving multiple schools.⁸² With so few of these personnel serving so many students, it is impossible for students' needs to be met.

Specialized instructional support personnel can also be instrumental in the selection and implementation of high-quality schoolwide social-emotional learning programs. Social-emotional learning programs improve the social skills and academic achievement of students and can improve school climate by reducing violence, bullying, and other conduct problems.⁸³ These skills are particularly important in early childhood education, as students as young as kindergarten who have strong prosocial skills are more likely to obtain a high school degree, college diploma, and full-time job when they reach adulthood.⁸⁴

School counselors also act as academic or guidance counselors, handling curriculum planning; interpreting and maintaining student records; and providing college counseling.⁸⁵ Many students who would be the first in their family to attend college desperately need help planning for and navigating this process, as they might have fewer adults in their lives who can provide information about college admissions and financial aid.⁸⁶ Every student who needs it should have access to this type of adviser and advocate who can help guide his or her college and career choices.

To better serve students, mental health counseling and academic guidance roles should be separated, and all students should have access to both types of supports. In addition, every student with pressing mental health needs should have access in school to counseling from a trained professional, and every school should have the personnel necessary to implement schoolwide behavioral support and social-emotional learning programs.

7. Eliminate crumbling school buildings

It is necessary to create a national school infrastructure program that will update school buildings while simultaneously creating jobs in local communities.

Approximately 14 million students across the country attend schools that are in need of extensive repairs or complete building replacement, and nearly two-thirds of American schools have at least one building feature that needs to be replaced or needs extensive repairs.⁸⁷

Just recently, the condition of schools in Baltimore made national news because the leaky windows and outdated heating systems forced students to huddle in coats and mittens in their classrooms in order to stay warm.⁸⁸ But this news is not new. In 2016, Detroit school buildings infested with rats caused similar national uproar;⁸⁹ and ensuring that hurricane-damaged schools in Puerto Rico are safe to reopen to students will be a long and difficult process.⁹⁰

While school building conditions are a national problem, the disrepair of America's public schools disproportionately affects students in low-income communities that cannot raise funds for maintenance, repair, or modernization. According to federal estimates, addressing deferred maintenance and repairs alone would cost about \$200 billion.⁹¹

As the stories coming out of places such as Baltimore, Detroit, and Puerto Rico make plain, a safe and comfortable school building is an important precondition for students to learn to their full potential. Children's health and learning are affected when schools have poor air quality, cannot maintain a comfortable temperature, are excessively noisy, or are poorly lit.⁹² School infrastructure projects are a wise investment because well-maintained school buildings can last up to 50 years and facilitate achievement of student outcomes.

A national school infrastructure program to update unsafe or unhealthy school buildings and create a national database on the condition of school facilities would also provide thousands of jobs across the country. Under such a program the majority of the funding should be targeted to schools with highest need, with the remainder set aside for low-cost bonds. This school infrastructure program would bring the neediest school buildings to a state of good repair and allow other schools to modernize and even retire debt for recent capital investments. And for every billion dollars spent, this program would create thousands of jobs—including both direct and indirect hires—for the life of the program. School buildings act as convening spaces for the community, and schools receiving these infrastructure funds could use them to meet various needs of the local school community in accordance with state and local laws.

Possible funding for new policy initiatives

With recent tax policy changes creating large national deficits and states facing persistent budget shortfalls, finding ways to pay for new policies is always difficult.⁹³ Below is a list of some creative ways to fund the ideas listed in the previous sections. This is by no means an exclusive list, as there are many resources available with suggestions for how to raise revenue,⁹⁴ including how to do so in line with progressive values and without increasing taxes.⁹⁵

- **Passing a legislative solution for Dreamers.** Permanent protections for Dreamers, those without legal status who came to the country at a young age, will have a profound impact on their lives while having an equally important impact on the national and local economies. Before the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program was rescinded in September 2017, a national survey of the recipients of the program—a subset of the Dreamer population—showed that they were able to pursue greater educational opportunities and earn higher wages.⁹⁶ Another report found that DACA recipients and DACA-eligible immigrants contribute approximately \$2 billion in state and local taxes annually.⁹⁷

The Center for American Progress has estimated that passing the Dream Act, which would make thousands of young workers already in the United States eligible for legal status, could add \$281 billion and as much as \$1 trillion to the country's gross domestic product over 10 years.⁹⁸

Legislation to protect Dreamers—including the 20,000 educators with DACA—that includes pathways to legal status or citizenship would not only increase the GDP, creating more revenue with which to improve public schools, but it would also mean that students and families across the country currently living in fear of deportation could focus on both their education and creating a better future for themselves and their communities.⁹⁹

- **Reducing the prison population and corrections spending.** A 2016 report released by the Department of Education revealed that in all but two states, spending on prisons is growing much faster than spending on public education, having quadrupled between 1979 and 2013.¹⁰⁰ The United States imprisons people at higher rates than any other country in the world and has a prison population of more than 2 million—the largest in the world.¹⁰¹

The more than \$80 billion in U.S. tax dollars spent annually on the corrections system would be better invested in public schools.¹⁰² In order to redirect funding from prisons to schools, state policymakers must find ways to reduce their prison populations. A good place to start would be the 1 in 5 incarcerated people that are locked up for a nonviolent drug offense.¹⁰³ The Brennan Center for Justice estimates that about 4 in 10 people in state and federal prison today present little or no public safety risk and could be released or have their sentences reduced for a total savings of \$20 billion each year.¹⁰⁴

In 2009, the Justice Policy Institute noted that some states have begun to decrease the size of the prison population—thereby reducing spending—by providing community-based substance-abuse treatment programs, increasing rehabilitation efforts, improving parole mechanisms and services, and decriminalizing nonviolent offenses.¹⁰⁵ States that intentionally decreased their prison populations saw crime decrease even faster than national averages.¹⁰⁶ Other states should consider such reforms.

Investing in school systems rather than prison systems would benefit the U.S. student population in more ways than one. Presently, incarceration disproportionately impacts people of color, and students of color disproportionately attend schools with fewer resources and less experienced teachers. Redirecting funding currently spent on corrections to the public education system would not only improve the educational experiences of students of color but could also positively impact their families, communities, and potentially life outcomes—ending, or at least disrupting, the vicious “school-to-prison pipeline.”¹⁰⁷

- **Leveraging taxes from marijuana sales.** In recent years, several states have decriminalized the use of medical marijuana, and a handful of states have legalized the use and sale of recreational marijuana. Since Colorado passed its law legalizing recreational marijuana in 2014, the state has brought in \$506 million in tax revenue, about half of which has gone to K-12 education.¹⁰⁸ Other states that have followed suit, such as Oregon and Washington, have also been able to capitalize on the additional tax revenue.¹⁰⁹
- **Selling advertising on government documents or locations.** In recent years, as options for reading and viewing content have diversified, advertisers have had increasing difficulty reaching mass audiences of customers. State-run entities, however, still hold the potential for reaching mass audiences since they may interact with all residents. Many localities are already raising revenue by selling advertising on local buses and in subway stations.¹¹⁰ States can expand on the same idea by allowing advertising in state highway rest stops or in state-run offices where there is a lot of wait time, such as the Department of Motor Vehicles or in state capitol cafeterias. States could also include advertisements or coupons in mailings and other communications to their residents.¹¹¹

Conclusion

Economic dislocation is a powerful threat to the well-being and security of American workers and the American economy. Millions of Americans feel anxious about the changing economy. Working-class jobs that once promised a lifetime of decent wages and benefits are disappearing, displaced by automation and jobs that favor a different set of skills.

Education is at the root of the country's broader economic challenges, and improvements to the education system offer the solution. Employers need talented workers who have the skills, disposition, and knowledge to operate effectively in the new economy. A progressive education agenda can ensure that all Americans are afforded the education needed to meet these challenges.

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