

A Citizens'  
Solutions Guide

# Education

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 PUBLIC AGENDA

# Where Things Stand

It's been a decade since former President Bush proposed and Congress passed the No Child Left Behind law. The goal of this law was to raise student achievement and reduce the gap between different groups of students, especially white and minority students. The law's passage reflected a broad consensus among elected officials, business leaders and others that American schools can and should do better.

With his election in 2008, President Obama has continued the reform movement. His Race to the Top initiative aims to promote policies that encourage adoption of best practices for better student learning. Around the country, governors, mayors, and other state and local officials have also worked to propel changes designed to ramp up student learning.

## An Era of Sweeping Educational Change

Specific policies vary from community to community because most education decisions are made by state and local governments. However, there is little doubt that the past decade has been an era of sweeping educational change. Schools are using more standardized testing to measure student progress. There is more emphasis on evaluating teachers' effectiveness in the classroom. Many districts have set higher requirements for high school graduation. Many have closed low-performing schools and given charters to groups of educators and innovators to open up new schools—so-called charter schools. As of summer 2012, 45 states and Washington, DC, have adopted the new Common Core standards detailing what students should learn in key subject areas like reading and math. As one independent education think tank puts it, the Common Core standards promise to be “a whole lot tougher than the ones most states are using now.” A few districts have already begun testing students on their mastery of the Common Core, and most are expected to do so by 2014.

## The Economics of Failure

Yet despite the recurring waves of reform, it's not clear how far we've come in raising student achievement and improving schools, or whether elected officials are really promoting the best policies to do so. Meanwhile, many leaders in government, business and education consider the issue more urgent than ever. Although most Americans recognize how tough today's economy is for young people who aren't well educated, not as many have focused on how shortfalls in the public education system nationwide could imperil our entire economy.

Major businesses are predicting shortages of skilled, well-educated workers within just a few years. As former Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings recently pointed out, the U.S. economy will have more than 120 million high-skilled jobs by 2020, but unless we dramatically step up our education game, there will only be 50 million workers qualified to fill them. In a time of high unemployment, that might seem like a desirable situation, but it's not. A labor shortage on that scale would put American companies at a much greater risk of losing business to foreign companies. There would be added pressure for U.S. companies to move their operations to countries where skilled workers are available. Developments like these could undermine the U.S. economy for decades.

## A Few Numbers to Mull Over

The nation's public schools face a number of daunting challenges, and while we've made progress in some areas, many of the statistics about our system aren't very comforting:

- Compared to students in 34 developed countries, American teens earn below average scores math and average scores in science. In math, our students came in at number 25 out of 34 and way below economic powerhouses like South Korea, Hong Kong, and Shanghai in China. When these numbers were released in 2010, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said they were a “wake up call” to improve public education.
- Three-quarters of students entering college are not adequately prepared for college-level work in areas such as reading, English, math or science, according to the ACT College Readiness tests. Colleges and universities spend about \$5.6 billion annually on remedial courses. As one education expert put it, we're “paying for the same education twice.”
- About a quarter of high school students do not graduate on time, a figure that jumps to roughly half of Hispanic and African-American students. Moreover, around half of students who drop out of high school come from just 12 percent of the nation's schools.
- The country has made progress closing the achievement gap. African-American and Hispanic students are doing better in reading and math than in the past, according to national tests. Even so, there are still troubling disparities. While nearly 4 in 10 white male students are “proficient” in reading by eighth grade, only 14 percent of African American male students are. Just 1 in 100 African-American male students is an “advanced reader” at that age.

- There's also evidence that low-income, minority students are not getting the help that might enable them to achieve. Only about 15 percent of teachers with a demonstrated ability to increase student achievement teach in high-poverty schools, according to the Center for Public Education.
- There is a broad debate about the effectiveness and morale of the nation's teaching corps. About 4 in 10 teachers in public schools are disheartened about their jobs. Nearly a third of all new teachers—and half of new teachers in urban districts—leave the field within 5 years.
- In 2010, the average starting salary for teachers was about \$39,000. Teachers' salaries max out at \$67,000 on average, about 14 percent less than what other professionals with similar levels of education make.
- There are also questions about whether education is adequately funded, whether the available funding is equitably distributed among higher and lower-income school districts, and the degree to which spending levels really affect student learning. According to the latest figures available, in 2008, the U.S. spent roughly \$600 billion in K–12 education. For comparison's sake, we spent just under \$700 billion on the military in 2008, including money for the Afghanistan war.
- On average, the country spends more than \$10,000 per pupil per year for public school education, and K-12 education spending consumes about a fifth of state budgets, based on 2010 figures. However, spending can vary widely by state, ranging from \$6,064 per pupil in Utah to \$18,618 per pupil in New York. Furthermore, within each state, spending also varies by district. In Massachusetts, which spent \$13,331 per pupil in 2010-2011, district spending ranged from \$9,648

per pupil in Shirley to \$31,294 in Provincetown.

- Americans' views on education are mixed. Most parents believe that the education their children receive is better than their own education, and more than 7 in 10 give their child's schooling a grade of A or B. At the same time, majorities of parents and the public at large also say public schools have serious problems such as cheating, bullying, and disrespect for teachers.

## Competing Visions on the Best Way to Improve Education

Nearly all education leaders and politicians at the national, state and local levels emphasize how crucial good schools are to our progress as a nation. But even though many may use similar words and rhetoric to talk about public education, there are actually strongly competing visions among policymakers about what works best.

In weighing our options, it might initially seem as if we ought to pursue all of them—or at least most of them—and creating and sustaining strong public schools does require action on multiple fronts. But the nation's resources are stretched, and there are many good purposes for limited tax dollars, including health, safety, defense, transportation, energy development and others. What's more, schools and communities generally need to focus on a few specific goals and strategies in order to be effective. Because of this, the country—and our states and communities—face some difficult choices on public education, and thinking through these choices can help citizens consider which possible policy solutions best reflect their own perspectives.

# Approach One

## Set high standards and hold schools, teachers and principals accountable for helping all children meet them.

The major problem in American education today is that we aren't really challenging students, teachers or principals to do their best. Too often, the curriculum is not demanding and falls far short of world-class standards. Districts accept lackluster teaching rather than systematically identifying and rewarding the best educators and working hard to improve the performance of the rest. Schools should set clear standards for students, teachers and principals and carefully monitor their performance to ensure that they're making progress.

### Arguments for:

- Students and teachers alike need to know what's expected of them. If you expect more, you get more.
- Setting high and consistent education standards is the only way to make sure that all American children—rich and poor—acquire the knowledge they need to succeed.
- Almost every other advanced industrial nation has an agreed-upon core curriculum that specifies what students are expected to learn at each grade level. That system has produced higher and more equitable academic achievement than our own.

### This should be done by:

- Having all 50 states adopt the new Common Core standards. These are more challenging academic standards and closer to what students in other countries are expected to learn.
- Taking teacher and principal evaluation seriously. Districts should use student test scores and extensive classroom and school visits to determine how well educators are doing and to encourage—and even require—they to adopt the most effective practices.
- Paying the most effective teachers and principals more. Excellence should be rewarded, and this will help ensure that the most qualified educators stay in public education.
- Closing or completely reorganizing schools with chronically poor test scores and high dropout rates. Allowing these failing schools to continue to operate harms students' futures.
- Improving standardized tests so they more accurately measure whether students are learning, and if they are not, demonstrate exactly where they are falling short. Better tests will help teachers improve their teaching and give parents and taxpayers more solid information on how well schools are doing.

### Arguments against:

- This approach puts too much emphasis on testing. Standardized tests have a role, but they shouldn't be used as a central basis for determining whether teachers are effective or whether students are really learning.
- This is a recipe for narrowing the curriculum and teaching to the test. Rather than teaching students to be curious and have a thirst for knowledge, we're teaching them to learn by rote.
- Having a national curriculum like the Common Core greatly weakens the ability of states and communities to have the kinds of schools they really want.

# Approach Two

## Give parents more choice about the schools their children go to.

Given the problems in public schools today, parents should have the freedom and wherewithal to send their children to private or charter schools or to better-performing traditional public schools if they want to. This would be especially helpful for families living in communities with seriously troubled public schools, and it encourages creative and dedicated educators to develop new, more innovative kinds of schools. What's more, the competition among schools will encourage more public schools to adopt best practices and really focus their efforts on serving parents and students—not on maintaining the status quo.

### Arguments for:

- Parents could choose the school that is best suited to their children's needs and interests. This gives average Americans an option that wealthy families have long enjoyed.
- Keeping children trapped in underperforming schools is not fair. A voucher system, or charter schools, gives families who live in low-performing school districts a way out so their children get a better chance in life.
- Increased competition among schools is one of the best ways to improve public schools. When the leaders of low-performing schools and districts see what's possible in private and charter schools – and when they see parents choosing these better options—they'll be more motivated to improve the schools they head.

### This should be done by:

- Giving parents more choice within public school systems by starting more charter and magnet schools and allowing parents to transfer their children to public schools in other districts—not just in their own communities.
- Giving vouchers to parents who aren't satisfied with local public schools to help them pay at least some of the cost of sending their child to a private school.
- Compiling a national database of important information about every school—both public and private. This could include student test scores, graduation rates, teacher qualifications, etc. That way, parents would have the information they need to make good choices.
- Encouraging districts to break up large, underperforming public schools and replace them with charter and private schools.
- Setting up fairs and exhibitions where parents can meet principals and faculty members from the different kinds of schools in their region and learn about their different track records and approaches.

### Arguments against:

- Research shows that students in public schools often outperform those in charter and private schools, and some districts have had to close charter schools because they were so ineffective. Choice is not a surefire recipe for improving student achievement.
- Giving parents vouchers and spending public money to start new charter schools means there will be even less financial support for traditional public schools, and nearly 9 in 10 American children attend traditional public schools.
- Going this route could signal the end of the traditional neighborhood school. Neighborhood schools are more than places for children to study academics. They are centers and symbols of our communities, so this would be a devastating loss.

# Approach Three

## Give public schools the financial and community support they need to help all children learn.

Most of the problems facing the public education system stem from its commitment to educating every child, including those who come from poor homes and troubled neighborhoods, those who don't speak English, and those who have special needs. As a country, we've never invested the adequate, properly-targeted funding to give these children the kind of intensive support and services they need. We also haven't provided the robust community involvement that's required to help struggling schools succeed. Until we do, public schools will continue to struggle, and in turn, so will our economy. We simply won't have enough well-educated workers to succeed in the new global economy.

### Arguments for:

- No school reform can succeed until schools have sufficient resources to provide a rich, high-quality educational environment for every child. Public schools need more money to do the job right.
- Top-quality preschool and out-of-school programs provide the leg up children from disadvantaged neighborhoods need to succeed in schools. We haven't invested nearly enough in this area.
- We say we're committed to equal opportunity, yet schools in poor communities often have less experienced and effective teachers, as well as high turnover among teachers and principals. It's time to bring the best educators to these schools and give them the resources, support, and respect they deserve.

### This should be done by:

- Providing top-quality early education programs for every child. This kind of early intervention is especially important for poor children and children with special needs
- Providing after-school and summer enrichment programs for all children. These opportunities shouldn't be limited to children from wealthier communities.
- Reducing class sizes, especially in schools with large numbers of poor and minority children. Teachers have been recommending this as way to improve student learning for years.
- Using state and federal taxes to augment local tax support in low-income areas, so all schools would have genuinely equal education funding.
- Paying the most effective and accomplished teachers and principals more to work in schools where students are struggling.

### Arguments against:

- This approach will cost an enormous amount of money, and the federal government and many state governments are already operating in the red. There's no way to pay for all of this without raising taxes, which is politically difficult and economically questionable in a poor economy.
- Some of the worst-performing school districts in the country have higher per-pupil spending than many better-performing ones. Without more standards and accountability, this extra spending won't do much.
- This approach means that children will be in classes and enrichment programs before kindergarten, after school and in the summer too. Families will have even less time together.

# Approach Four

**Make sure every school has a talented, committed principal who will work closely with teachers to transform what happens inside the school every day.**

Schools won't improve until we put a laser-like focus on changing what happens inside them on a day-to-day basis. Setting higher standards, investing more money, or giving parents more choice won't change anything unless we work to transform every school into its own community where learning and achievement are everyday priorities—for students and teachers alike. This means that we need top notch principals in every school. Meanwhile, principals and teachers need better preparation, coaching, and the time and freedom to work together to improve student learning.

## **This should be done by:**

- Dramatically improving the recruitment, training and expectations of principals to focus more on student learning and less on administrative duties. Then give principals more autonomy to choose their staff and school policies.
- Changing the way schools operate so principals and teachers work together, and making sure principals have enough time to give teachers the guidance and feedback they need to be more effective in the classroom.
- Hiring more administrative staff so teachers and principals can spend their time focusing on teaching and learning, not on paperwork and support functions.
- Rolling back some of the red tape and bureaucracy that consumes so much of principals' and teachers' time and energy. With top-notch leaders in place, schools don't need to be so heavily regulated.
- Working to change the climate in schools and bolster student motivation through school uniforms, codes of conduct, special programs for disruptive students and other measures that create an environment where teachers and students can concentrate on teaching and learning.

## **Arguments for:**

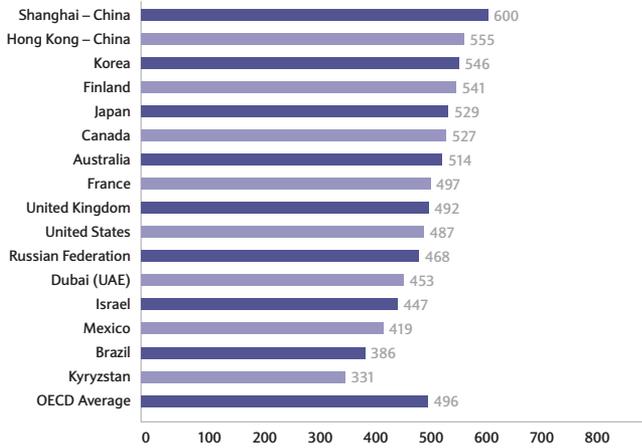
- Principals are no longer just school managers; they are instructional leaders who recruit, coach, evaluate and support the teaching staff. They need the preparation, autonomy and time to fulfill this role. It's time to get the administrative minutiae off their backs.
- Effective principals are the single most important factor in creating a school climate that clearly emphasizes learning as priority number one. Principals establish the sense of mission and environment where teachers can teach and students can learn.
- Surveys of teachers show that the vast majority welcome more advice and feedback from principals and other teachers as well. Too many teachers are left to struggle with the sometimes daunting challenges of teaching without this kind of professional support and consultation.

## **Arguments against:**

- This approach places too much of the responsibility on principals, and even the best ones can't be effective without strong financial, parent and community support.
- Cutting back on school regulation could cause a host of problems. Most regulations exist to ensure that schools are safe, healthy places for children and that districts treat all teachers and students fairly.
- Educators sometimes misuse codes of conduct and special programs to remove students they don't want to work with, and there are important questions of bias and racial justice at stake. Government statistics show that minority students and students with special needs are more likely to face tough discipline in schools.

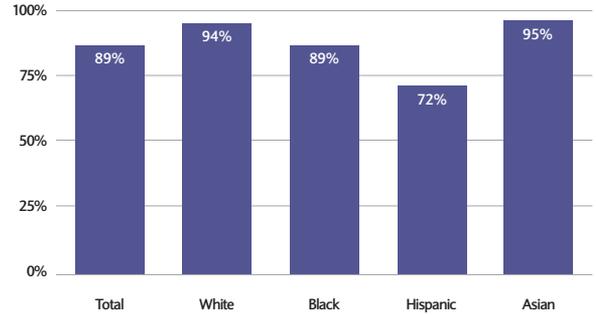
## International Math Performance

Performance of 15-year-olds on the PISA math scale, 2009. Source: "PISA 2009 Key Findings: Executive Summary," 2012, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)



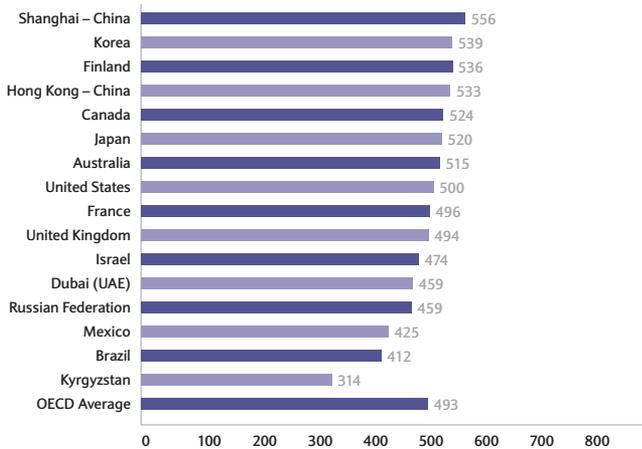
## High School Graduation Rates

Percentage of 25- to 29-year-olds who attained a high school diploma or equivalent, by race and ethnicity, 2011. Note: Totals include other racial/ethnic groups not separately shown. Persons of Hispanic origin may be of any race. Source: "The Condition of Education 2012," May 2012, National Center for Education Statistics



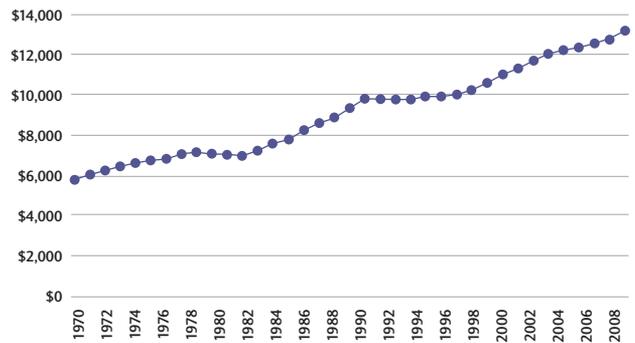
## International Reading Performance

Performance of 15-year-olds on the PISA reading scale, 2009. Source: "PISA 2009 Key Findings: Executive Summary," 2012, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)



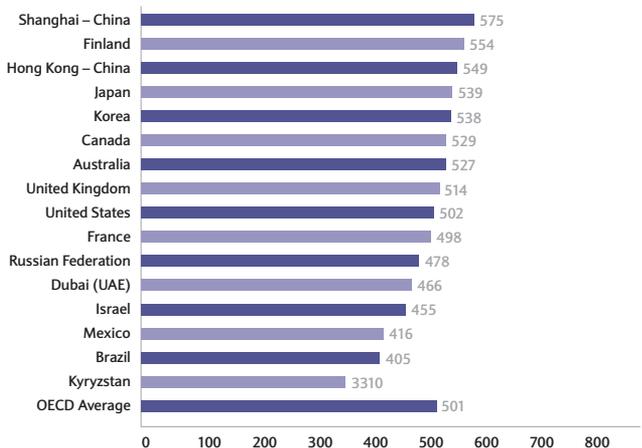
## Spending Per Pupil

Total expenditure per public school pupil in average daily attendance, in constant 2009-2010 dollars, 1970-2008. Source: "Digest for Education Statistics 2011," May 2012, National Center for Education Statistics



## International Science Performance

Performance of 15-year-olds on the PISA science scale, 2009. Source: "PISA 2009 Key Findings: Executive Summary," 2012, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)



## Resources to learn (and do!) more:

### Education Department:

**U.S. Department of Education:** At the Department's website, you can find information on legislation, regulations, the Department's budget and strategic plan, and more. <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/landing.jhtml>

### Understanding K-12 Education Reform:

**RAND Congressional Resources:** RAND's Education Issues page provides policymakers and others access to politically relevant education research and analysis. You can also sign up to receive congressional education updates. <http://www.rand.org/congress/education.html>

**Common Core State Standards Initiative:** Includes reports which outline the standards, criteria and considerations for implementing the Common Core program. <http://www.corestandards.org/resources>

**"The Progress of Education Reform, Defining College Readiness," Education Commission of the States:** This guide presents the critical elements to weigh in preparing our nation's children for college. <http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/01/01/22/10122.pdf>

**State Education Reforms:** This site from the Institute of Education Sciences compiles data on state education reform activities. <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/statereform/>

**"The Nation's Report Card," The National Assessment of Educational Progress:** A national report card on the progress of elementary and secondary students in the U.S. <http://nationsreportcard.gov/about.asp>

### Education Engagement:

**Public Agenda Education Publications:** Resources from decades of research and engagement in K-12 education. Topics include out-of-school learning, STEM, education standards and the teaching profession; discussion guides on education reform; and case studies on public engagement in education.

<http://www.publicagenda.org/citizen/researchstudies/education>

***You Can't Do It Alone: A Communications and Engagement Manual for School Leaders Committed to Reform:*** From Jean Johnson, author of this guide, and published by Rowman & Littlefield in 2011, this book gives a summary of research in K-12 education and guides education leaders on best practices for engaging teachers, parents, students and the community. <https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781610483001>

### Tools to Act and Interact:

**Everyone at the Table:** For education leaders looking to gather valuable input from teachers, this site, from American Institutes of Research and Public Agenda, houses free resources for authentically including teachers' voices in the policy conversation on teacher evaluation reform. <http://www.everyoneatthetable.org/>

**Public Schools of Choice with Seth Andrew:** TEDxHarlem presentation on creating the next generation of engaged citizens, based on Andrew's experience at Democray Prep in Harlem. <http://youtu.be/4niKSvmG3Kk>

**Virtual Roundtable Series, GETIdeas.org:** Each month, education leaders come together to comment during a week-long discussion on different topics, including assessment, equity and global learning. <http://getideas.org/programs/virtual-roundtables/>

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### About the Citizens' Solutions Guides:

Public Agenda's Citizens' Solutions Guides are nonpartisan, unbiased resources to help you think through a difficult issue in alternative ways, weighing and evaluating values, priorities, pros, cons and tradeoffs. The Guides can also be used as discussion starters for community and group conversations and in classes. Note that the Citizens' Solutions Guides are meant to help people start thinking and talking about an issue in productive ways — they are not meant to rigidly restrict thinking or dialogue. The perspectives described are not the only ways of dealing with the problem, nor are the viewpoints mutually exclusive in every respect. You can mix and match from different perspectives, or add additional related ideas.

"Education: A Citizens' Solutions Guide" was written by [Jean Johnson](#) of Public Agenda, author of *You Can't Do It Alone*. For more information on the sources for this material, please refer to the Citizens' Solutions Guides online at <http://www.publicagenda.org/pages/citizens-solutions-guides>

### About Public Agenda:

Public Agenda is a national, nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to strengthening democracy and improving people's lives. Through research and public engagement, we help leaders, citizens and stakeholders build common ground on solutions to tough public problems like education reform, the environment and healthcare. Public Agenda was founded in 1975 by the social scientist and public opinion expert Dan Yankelovich and former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, and is based in New York City.

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