

# A Generation At Risk:

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A  
CALL  
TO ACTION

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The Building Bridges Initiative  
September 2023

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## A Generation at Risk: A Call to Action

During the pandemic, disruptions in schooling for students, unpredictability of the job market, and a deep lack of infrastructure and capacity to keep students learning remotely left our public school system in a state of constant stress and frustration for both educators and parents. However, most concerning is the impact on our students.

Student achievement in math and reading [plummeted](#) to levels we haven't seen in twenty years. Tragically, the incidence of mental health crises, including suicide attempts by young people, [spiked markedly](#). These alarming trends affect all students, with students of color, students living in poverty, and students with disabilities experiencing the most severe impacts—widening gaps that were already unacceptable before the pandemic.

Left unaddressed, the effect on our nation's social and economic health will be staggering, and it will be America's young people who pay the true cost. Recent data [indicate](#) that the average student will likely earn 5.9 percent lower earnings over their lifetimes, leading to a GDP that's potentially 1.9 percent lower for the remainder of the century.

And the challenges continue. With the pressures of political polarization, a rapidly aging society, a fluid job market, and the emerging capabilities of artificial intelligence, today's children face uncertain futures. We must step up now as advocates to find every means necessary to support our students and their choices.

We cannot be a great nation if we don't do right by our young people.

**And we are not doing nearly enough, especially for students from marginalized communities.**

### Building Bridges Initiative

In the spring of 2022, the Building Bridges Initiative convened a group of education advocates from the Left, Right, and Center to discuss American education in the wake of the Covid pandemic. Over the course of twelve months and six in-person convenings, we shared, debated, disagreed, and ultimately found common ground. It was not easy, but it was always respectful. We brought in evidence to support our claims, and we wrestled honestly with different perspectives. Ultimately, what made this process work despite our differences were the key values that we held in common:

- The fundamental belief that every student has a right to fulfill their utmost potential and a conviction that our schools and society should be doing much more to make this aspiration a reality

- A belief in public education as a critical player in preparing citizens to effectively participate in our democracy and as a critical engine of social and economic mobility in America
- Deep respect for the role that educators and parents play in supporting student success

**What is clear is that today's K–12 students need much more from us if they are to meet the challenges of the future.**

We crafted this call to action to our fellow education advocates, to education policymakers, to the educators leading our schools, and to the families we serve: we seek bold action to quickly and dramatically improve the learning opportunities for today's students, while we simultaneously begin putting in place the building blocks of a more responsive system that will help future generations of students address the challenges of the world to come.

We want all children in all communities to experience what many affluent families in America already enjoy: the ability to access a variety of strong educational supports and enrichment experiences that prepare their children to have agency, economic mobility, and opportunity. We want families to have the knowledge, tools, and relationships that allow them to be a partner in their students' education, ensuring that every student has access to what they need to be successful.

While our group of education advocates did not agree on everything we discussed, we all agree that we need a bold vision for change, leadership that works across lines of difference, and decisive action if we are to make good on America's promises to our children, today and in the future.

And we agreed that we need a two-pronged approach moving forward. We need to begin to build a more responsive, modern educational system—at the same time as we urgently address the immediate needs of today's students.

**Building a more responsive educational system for the future**

The educational system we have today is not able to effectively adapt to change. We knew that calcification and stagnation were system-wide challenges prior to the pandemic, but Covid laid bare the gross inadequacies. And as we move from a world of knowledge workers to a world stocked with generative artificial intelligences, the need for a highly adaptive educational system—capable of preparing its students for a very different future—is more critical than ever. To be clear, this is a fundamentally different purpose than what the current system was designed to do, and achieving it will require a transformation of the student experience. Although we do not pretend to have the answers, some basic building blocks seem clear.

At a high level, this “more responsive” system should do the following:

- Be firmly centered around students and their needs
- Give parents and families true information, power, and agency to understand, support, choose, and advocate for their children’s education in a real and actionable way
- Aim for a broader definition of student success and enable a broader set of providers—inside and outside of schools—to play a role in meeting our students’ needs

A student-centered education is one that starts from the premise that every child is a unique individual, with their own particular hopes and dreams, strengths and challenges. While our system must make sure that all students master the knowledge, skills, and competencies that will allow them to succeed in our economy and participate fully in our democracy (including traditional academics), it need not treat them as interchangeable widgets. Just as our extracurricular offerings provide a range of opportunities for children to find and express themselves and their talents, so too should our core academic programming.

We signers all agree that parents need real power within our system. Parental empowerment means parents will hold schools accountable for their own children’s learning and, in the process, make schools more effective and responsive for all. Accordingly, we support longstanding and bipartisan policies that have expanded options for families within public education, including charter schools, magnet schools, and inter- and intradistrict choice. We also believe that as worthy as these options are, they do not go far enough, especially when it comes to putting significant pressure on our traditional school system to meet the needs of all students. And we believe that parents need trustworthy information about how their children, and their children’s schools, are performing against real-world standards.

We see several possibilities for taking parent empowerment to the next level, including better structures for parent/student/educator collaboration around setting student goals and designing pathways to achieve them and systems of funding that engage parents in directing the educational experiences and opportunities that will serve their children best.

Our move toward a student-centered system and toward greater parental empowerment shouldn’t be limited to academics. While achievement in English language arts, math, history, science, and the other components of a liberal education remain essential for success in our advanced economy, other skills and attributes are also critical for student success and for human flourishing. According to the World Economic Forum’s [\*Future of Jobs\*](#) report, nine of the top ten most in-demand skills are durable or soft skills. Affluent families already enjoy the ability to invest significant financial resources to ensure their children enjoy a well-rounded education, broadly defined, through myriad after-school enrichment activities, tutoring opportunities, and sports. All American families should be able to access



a well-rounded education for their children, too, with components provided both within the regular school day and via outside providers.

## **Building the conditions for the system of the future**

To bring such a responsive system to life, policymakers and practitioners will need to make real changes to the conditions that undergird teaching and learning. Some of these include the following:

- **Making school and district boundaries more permeable.** Such geographic boundaries are products of decades of housing segregation and redlining and prevent students from going to the school or accessing the services which best meet their needs. An interim step is to legislate open enrollment so that students can attend any school or access any service that has room for them.
- **Abolishing “seat-time” models and instead validating mastery as students demonstrate learning.** School systems should document and endorse valuable student experiences (work, internships, caregiving, outside courses) as well as for things students demonstrate that they know/can do, regardless of where these were learned.
- **Modernizing school-finance arrangements and enacting weighted student-funding formulas and other systems that empower families with financial resources** to drive extra dollars to the students who need them most and allowing flexibility for resources to be spent inside and outside of schools in ways that best meet the needs of students.
- Building **an infrastructure that supports business, philanthropic, and community-based providers as partners** to schools and families. We should, for example, allow experts to come into schools as teachers—live or virtually—and engage students in learning and invite healthcare providers to open clinics inside schools, making services more convenient for families and more affordable for providers.
- **Embracing new approaches to attracting, preparing, and deploying talent** to expand the pipeline of diverse, high-quality teachers, administrators, leaders, tutors, and others.
- Enabling a **redesign of teachers’, principals’ and leaders’ roles** to be more effective, attractive, and sustainable.
- **Investing in research and development, data, and evaluation** to figure out which schools, courses, programs, and providers are getting strong results and which are not; to develop and evaluate instructional materials and other key tools and technologies; and to deliver individualized student data reports to families and those who support them.

Happily, various states and communities are already embracing elements of these new ways to deliver education. Some of these green shoots sprouted before and during the pandemic; others have been cultivated in its aftermath. All point toward a future that families, educators, and policymakers are building together.

## **Building for the current generation of students**

Our group came together to look well into the future, but we cannot ignore the realities in front of us. The pandemic created a new imperative for improvement—improvement that was necessary prepandemic but has become significantly more urgent in its aftermath. An immediate response is needed or there will be both near-term and long-term consequences for our current generation of students and for society as a whole.

What’s more, the very nature of the pandemic response revealed how the current system is centered on adult issues, not student and family needs. It revealed how inequities are hardwired into the current system. It showed how rarely evidence- and data-driven decision-making are used. And it revealed an outdated operating system that is rigid and unresponsive to individual student needs and family preferences.

While the specific action steps could vary based on local needs, we believe that now is the time to open the door to new modes of service and a wider variety of student experiences aligned to both the short-term demands and the long-term aims of public education. This means shifting power to parents and students; maximizing the array of choices and options available to families, heavily informed by clear, actionable information and assurances of equal opportunity; and holding adults who are delivering educational and related services accountable for ensuring student success and well-being.

Helping students recover from the impact of school closures, lost learning time, and the social isolation and stressors of the pandemic is a core requirement of any school improvement effort for the next five to ten years, but the goal cannot be to catch up. If we do not act now to begin building toward a more joyful, agile, and student-centered system, when will we?

At the same time, we realize that educators must heed the lessons of the past. This is a moment to advocate for widespread adoption of what has already proven effective, to stop doing things that do not work, and to test ideas that have the potential to move public education into a new era.

To that end, there are five commitments we believe worthy of consideration in addressing immediate needs. Though we don’t agree on every detail, we believe that these five actions are a strong beginning—a foundation upon which a more responsive and engaging educational system can be built going forward.

1. **Set goals aligned to recovery and our evolving understanding of educational outcomes and report on them clearly and accurately.** This includes setting recovery goals at the state, district, school, and student levels. It includes trustworthy reporting by school systems of students’ academic progress and performance, both to families and, disaggregated by population, to policymakers. It includes accountability for schools in ensuring that students reach their academic and

postsecondary goals. And it includes indicators of student success as determined by the educators, parents, and communities in which the students live.

2. **Ensure that schools and educators use evidence-based strategies and interventions to meet all students' needs.** This may include, for example, the following:
  - Ensuring that all teachers have access to the kinds of tools, resources, and professional supports necessary to help them educate their students, such as early-literacy materials consistent with the science of reading and curriculum materials that are aligned to standards and include activities and tasks that help teachers engage and challenge students—allowing teachers to focus their time, energy, and creativity on bringing lessons to life and addressing the individual academic, social and emotional needs of each student. States in the [CCSSO Instructional Materials/Professional Development Network](#) offer examples worthy of study.
  - Providing teachers and school leaders with ongoing professional learning and coaching that are research informed and focused on improving teaching and learning.
  - Giving struggling students access to interventions, such as tutoring, that research tells us are effective. [Accelerate](#) and the [National Student Support Accelerator](#) support states and districts to bridge the gaps between research, communities, and school systems to ensure thoughtful adoption of proven tutoring strategies.
3. **Rethink how time and staff are used** to improve impact with students and to improve quality of life for educators. Fundamentally reimagining school-based professional roles is critical to better meeting student and family needs and to building more rewarding and sustainable careers for educators. Many have been experimenting with redesigning the one-teacher/one-classroom model. Some districts are reorganizing teachers so that they specialize and work in teams to reduce burnout. Others are experimenting with paying teachers differentially based on different levels and types of jobs, such as master teachers, associate teachers, community mental health providers, parent tutors, and so on. Dozens of school districts across the U.S. are already piloting this approach through participation in the [Opportunity Culture](#) and [Next Education Workforce Initiatives](#), as well as in states (see [North Carolina's Advanced Teaching Roles initiative](#)).
4. **Evaluate emerging innovations, successes, and failures.** The challenges of catching students up before they graduate, addressing behavioral and emotional needs without compromising on academics, improving instruction without exacerbating teacher burnout, and preparing this generation of students for a rapidly shifting economy, environment, and civic society are a truly “wicked” set of problems. They will require innovative solutions that go far beyond what we know today to be “evidence based.” To get to those new solutions—and to know when states and



districts are not on track—will require a significant investment in, and commitment to, research, evidence-gathering, and analysis.

States such as [North Carolina](#) and [Connecticut](#) are setting the pace on this approach by investing in data and research to get fine-grained detail on how federal ESSER dollars are being spent and to what effect, paying for rigorous evaluations on which students are falling farthest behind, and tracking whether they are catching up. The state of Texas has encouraged districts, through their [innovation zones](#), to adopt [spending strategies](#) customized to local contexts and individual student needs, including measurement systems and flexibility from state mandates. And [Annenberg’s EdResearch for Recovery initiative](#) publishes actionable research aimed at helping educators use evidence to strengthen practice. We believe that states and districts should think even bigger—for example, by investigating how schools might use new artificial intelligence tools, such as [Khan Academy’s Khanmigo](#), to accelerate student learning.

We must, as one superintendent opined, use this moment to overcome our “addiction to the status quo.” Doing so will require a commitment to experimentation and accountability for results-based interventions and solutions.

5. **Help ensure that every student has a way back into education and a pathway through that works for them** by making it easier for students to resume their progress toward the learning and credentialing they need to thrive—whether they dropped out of high school or graduated without the competencies they needed.

A more permeable set of high-quality pathways between high school, college, and career is urgently needed now and will be much needed in the future. States such as [Colorado](#), [Washington](#), and [Delaware](#) are investing in a variety of pathways into college and career, creating internships, apprenticeships, and more “career-connected” school and district instructional models. Students should also have access to trustworthy advice about career and college options and supports to and through college. Let’s use this moment to make American high schools future ready and break down rigid and outdated silos between high school, college, and career.

In all, what is needed to meet this moment is truly the beginning of a new reform agenda: ambitious goals, individualized information and solutions, and a commitment to test and study new models. The challenge in front of us cannot be to “catch up” the Covid generation. It must instead be to propel this cohort of students into the future. We need them to be at their best—and we need a better system for those who follow them.

If you find this vision compelling, we ask you to join us in constructing approaches to these critical building blocks for students now, even as our school systems seek to remake themselves to provide stronger educational experiences for all America’s children going forward.

## **Building together**

Many ideas are packed into this document—and many more are being tried around the country. We urge you to identify those you agree with, adapt them to make them work in your communities, and begin implementing.

And just as importantly, we hope that you will join us in conversation. For too many years now, the education debate has been taking place inside echo chambers, in shouting matches, or not at all. It's our intention to interrupt that dynamic.

We will only progress as a nation and meet this moment if we listen to one another and find great ideas from the Left, Right, and Center.

So when you turn this last page, don't let that be the end.

Find someone in the education sector—especially someone across lines of difference—and say to them, "Let's talk." Ask them questions like these:

- How can we do right by this generation of students?
- What might these ideas look like in our given state, district, or school?
- How can we get the education conversation unstuck?
- How can we work together to spark bold and lasting action and change?

We need you, the reader, to take action on behalf of America's children and to continue the dialogue.

Are you in?