

**From the Ground Up:
Restoring the Promise of Education**

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Abstract

For 43 years, the U.S. Department of Education has striven to improve the educational outcomes for students in the public school system. The results have been discouraging at best and abysmal at worst. With test scores dropping and reading comprehension levels declining, millions of parents have resorted to homeschooling their children or enrolling them in private schools. This paper will examine the impact of families and how they can restore the promise of education. At the local level, parents and concerned citizens should review the impact of their local school boards and how they can become involved to effect positive change. Education policies that promote school choice and educational flexibility should be promoted at the local, state, and federal levels. A comprehensive approach is needed to help ensure equality of opportunity for each child in America.

Keywords: Education, Schools, School Boards, School Choice, Public Policy, Family, Children

Introduction

When a Loudoun County parent was arrested during a June 2021 school board meeting, tremors were sent through the realm of education policy. The man in question, whose daughter attends a school in the Loudoun County public school system, spoke against the new policy on allowing students of any gender to use the bathroom of their choice after his daughter was sexually assaulted the previous school year.¹ The grand jury tasked with investigating the incident later reported, “We believe throughout this ordeal LCPS administrators were looking out for their own interests, instead of the best interest of the LCPS. This invariably led to a stunning lack of openness, transparency, and accountability.”² It is not the purpose of this paper to weigh in on LCPS’s policy but to look at the root causes of the issue. In the wake of this incident, and others like it, many parents felt they no longer had a voice in their children’s education. This incident became a proxy for a much larger debate, one that had been growing since the COVID-19 pandemic. Millions of children attended school remotely, and their parents got their first look at what was happening in their children’s classrooms. National outlets, such as CNN, have broadcasted packed school board meetings, where parents lined up to voice their concerns.³ The cracks in the education system, lack of transparency, lower student achievement, and out-of-control spending were again in the national spotlight.

Since the Federal Government formed the Department of Education almost 44 years ago, there have been countless questions on the direction of schools. Clarke E. Cochran, Professor of Political Science at Texas Tech University, noted that this is not the first time that the national government and the local school boards have focused on area beyond student achievement. In the 1960s and 1970s, innovative programs reduced the role of the “3 Rs”, reading, writing, and arithmetic, and instead focused on other factors.⁴ Concurrently, student achievement rates dropped, and much like today, there was a great outcry from the parents.⁵ A common refrain: *those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it* has come true in the arena of education. Who is tasked with keeping the education system focused on preparing students for life ahead, for teaching the skills they will need? With a decline in parental accountability, lowering test scores, and rising education costs, there are several challenges, more than one solution is needed. Policymakers and citizens should consider how they should educate their children at home, influence local education, and impact change at the state and local levels.

The Problems of American Education

Parental Accountability

A child’s parents hold all legal and moral rights and responsibilities to a child and thus should have transparent access to and some decision-making in their children’s education. The Philosopher John Locke noted 330 years ago that no other human institution could adequately teach children morality like the family.⁶ Outside of God, no one will know that child better.⁷

¹ Max Eden, “What Happened in Loudon Schools,” Real Clear Education, December 13, 2022, https://www.realcleareducation.com/articles/2022/12/13/what_happened_in_loudoun_schools_110798.html.

² Special Grand Jury of Loudoun County, Report on the Special Grand Jury on the Investigation of Loudoun County Public Schools: CL-22-3129, Kenneth P. Atkinson, et al., Circuit Court of Loudoun County: 2022, 2. <https://www.loudoun.gov/specialgrandjury>.

³ Paul LeBlanc, “School boards are under siege. It’s going to get worse,” CNN, November 1, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/11/01/politics/school-board-meetings-harassment/index.html>.

⁴ Clarke E. Cochran et al., *American Public Policy: An Introduction*, (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2015), 291.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ John Locke, *John Locke on Politics and Education*, Roslyn, NY: Walter J. Black, Inc., 1947, 52

⁷ Ibid, 55.

Logically, a parent has more vested interest in their child's success and more insight into their needs than anyone. No matter how wise and well-meaning, no one could have the same level of understanding for millions of children while working in a state house or Washington, D.C. James Coleman noted in his 1966 report on education that, among other conclusions, parental involvement was a contributing factor of student success.⁸ Rasmussen University provides further reports that lead to the same conclusion; parental involvement leads to greater success for their children.⁹ Yet despite data showcasing the benefit of parental involvement, there is no apparent effort to involve the parents.

Having subject matter experts in the field is vital to the continued health of education. Some educators devote their lives to learning how to research, prepare, and present the material to the children. The reason that the education system exists is that some parents either do not have the time or do not have the ability to educate their children. This does not mean parents should be kept out of the decision-making process, especially as there is growing opposition to what is taught in public schools. A poll conducted by the group, Parents Defending Education, noted that 74% of parents were against how race is present in public schools.¹⁰ 69% opposed teaching only curriculum which teaches that America was "founded on racism and is structurally racist."¹¹ 75% of parents polled disagreed with teaching young children about sex and gender identity.¹² Each issue is highly contentious in society, with a litany of viewpoints. The data shows that parents are okay with differing viewpoints; 87% agreed that "teachers should present students with multiple perspectives on contentious political and social issues."¹³ This conflict between parents and educators warrants collaboration rather than contentious debates. There is room for compromise, for discussion rather than only one group having a say in education.

This is showcased through the parental advocacy groups and the heightened incidents of parental disagreement with the school curriculum. Parents Defending Education has documented the creation and existence of 227 advocacy groups dedicated to promoting parental rights in education across 42 states.¹⁴ Traditionally, people do not spend time and money, especially on advocacy groups, on a whim. Further, Parents Defending Education have noted 691 separate incidents of conflict between parents and school boards over the past few years.¹⁵ These include minor items, from textbook revisions to significant items, such as the Loudoun County incident. Many parents do not even have the option of going before the school boards because only 20 states

⁸ U.S. Department of Health, Education, & Welfare, Office of Education, James S. Coleman et al., Equality of Educational Opportunity, ED012275, 1966, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED012275.pdf>, 325.

⁹ Ashley Brooks, "Experts Discuss the Importance of Positive Parental Involvement in Education," Rasmussen University, November 18, 2019, <https://www.rasmussen.edu/degrees/education/blog/parental-involvement-in-education/>.

¹⁰ Parents Defending Education, "Parents Defending Education: Americans Overwhelmingly Reject "Woke" Race and Gender Policies in K-12 Education," Parents Defending Education, May 10, 2021, <https://defendinged.org/commentaries/parents-defending-education-national-poll-americans-overwhelmingly-reject-woke-race-and-gender-policies-in-k-12-education/>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Parents Defending Education, "IndoctrinNation Map," Parents Defending Education, February 2, 2023, <https://defendinged.org/map/?state-filter=&district-filter=&types-filter=incidents,parent-organizations,case-study,report,media-item&issues-filter=&public-private-filter=public,private>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

have legal provisions granting parents the ability to do so.¹⁶ There is no one size fits all solution to how much parents should be involved in their children's education. Still, the current trend has been unpalatable to many parents and illogical considering parental involvement's benefits.

Falling Test Scores

While there are disagreements between Conservative and Liberal ideologies on how to approach education, there is a commonality that both want higher student achievement.¹⁷ Parents have a vested interest in their children's success, and one thing that has encouraged them to get involved, both today and in the 1970s, was the decline of student test scores. For better or worse, these test scores have become barometers of student achievement, and generate attention whether they rise or fall. Finding advocates for lower test scores and decreased student achievement would be challenging. Despite this, the current state of the school system is characterized by low test scores. This study utilized the SAT historical scores to analyze the movement in test scores since 1995 as a means of tracking student achievement over the course of several decades. This test has been taken by millions of students and remains a common requirement for acceptance into colleges and universities while providing a consistent and standard barometer of student test scores. In 1996, the test was "recentered" to align the percentiles of the math and reading schools, and the result was that students got higher scores on the new exam.¹⁸ The SAT was redesigned in 2006, and later, in 2016, the SAT received an overhaul; both times, scores were inflated, and challenging sections examining math and reading were removed from the exam.¹⁹ The administrators, the College Board provide concordance tables to help "concord" the scores from 1995-2006, 2007-2016, and 2017-2022, allowing for analysis over the years.²⁰ This was used to adjust the scores from 1995-2006 and 2007-2016 to the same scale as the 2017-2022 scores.

The results have shown a decline, even as challenging parts of the exam have been removed (as noted above). As can be seen from Table 1, the scores have gradually declined across the board. From 1995-2022, the average score on the math portion dropped from 536 to 521, a decrease of 2.8%. This is below the benchmark of 530, or the 50th percentile mark that the College Board set in 2016.²¹ Table 1 shows that the reading section has declined from 554 in 1995 to 529, a stark decrease of 4.51%. The reading benchmark was 480 in 2016, so the average student surpassed the 50th percentile.²² Finally, the decline of the total scores, as shown in Table 1, was 40 points over the 27 years studied. This is a decline of 3.67%. Since 1998, there have not been two concurrent years where SAT scores have improved.²³ On the opposite end of the spectrum, there have been three occurrences where scores have increased from year to year. The starkest drop was seen around 2015-2016, but it is beyond the scope of this study to examine what caused the decline during this period.

¹⁶ Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, "Is there a right to participate in public meetings," Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, <https://www.rcfp.org/open-government-sections/a-is-there-a-right-to-participate-in-public-meetings/>.

¹⁷ Cochran, *American Public Policy*, 280.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 292.

¹⁹ Sasha Chada, "History of the SAT," Ivy Scholars, July 3, 2019, <https://www.ivyscholars.com/2019/07/03/the-evolution-of-the-sat/#:~:text=The%20following%20year%2C%20a%20%E2%80%9Ccentering,scores%20of%20new%20test%20takers.>

²⁰ <https://satsuite.collegeboard.org/higher-ed-professionals/implementation-archive>

²¹ College Board, "Total Group Profile," College Board, 2022.

²² *Ibid*.

²³ College Board, "Total Group Profile," College Board, 2016.

Table 1: Sample of Concorded SAT Scores from 1995-2022

	1995	1996	1999	2003	2007	2011	2015	2019	2020	2021	2022
Math	536	538	541	549	544	544	541	528	523	528	521
Reading	554	555	555	557	552	550	549	531	541	545	529
Total	1090	1093	1096	1106	1096	1094	1090	1059	1051	1060	1050

Source(s): Adapted from: College Board, “Total Group Profile,” College Board, 2016., College Board, “Total Group Profile,” College Board, 2017. College Board, “Total Group Profile,” College Board, 2018. College Board, “Total Group Profile,” College Board, 2019. College Board, “Total Group Profile,” College Board, 2020. College Board, “Total Group Profile,” College Board, 2021. College Board, “Total Group Profile,” College Board, 2022.

Looking at individual scores is beyond the scope of this study, but quick analysis utilizing benchmarking, or the 50th percentile score, provided since 2017, reveals some concerning details. In 2022, only 43% of test takers were able to meet the set benchmarks of 530 for Math and 480 for Reading.²⁴ On the opposite end of the spectrum, 32% of students, nearly one out of three, did not score in the 50th percentile for either category.²⁵ Individually, students scored higher on reading than math, with 65% meeting the benchmark for the “Evidence-Based Reading” portion and 45% meeting the standard for math.²⁶ Since the College Board started tracking the data on benchmarking in 2017, the highest percentage of students meeting the benchmark for both sections was 47% in 2018.²⁷ The number of students achieving the standard in reading is down 5% from 2017-2022 and 4% in math during the same period.²⁸ Over the past twenty-five years, it is clear that student performance has gradually declined, despite numerous attempts to reform the curriculum and improve the system.

School Funding

It is a common idea to think that spending more money on a problem will help solve it, but without any other solution, it is just wishful thinking. How many times has a politician called for more funding for education, more money for school construction and for teacher pay? As the economist Milton Friedman once noted, many countries that are based on free enterprise systems, not just America, have taken over the funding of the education system, without considering why this area needs to be under government control.²⁹ The myth that more education spending, without overhauling education policy, will fix the system’s problems is intellectually dishonest; this solution has not worked for nearly 60 years.

The U.S. Department of Education tracks the money spent on education since the formation of the Office of Education in 1965. Adjusted for inflation, the U.S. government spent \$14,928,990,000 on elementary and secondary education that year.³⁰ In the most recent year of data available, 2020, that number has climbed to \$89,917,596,000.³¹ This is a rate of increase of 502% over fifty-five years. This does not include any additions made by the states themselves toward their education budgets. Since 1965, the federal government has spent \$2,606,993,168,000

²⁴ College Board, “Total Group Profile,” College Board, 2022.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ College Board, “Total Group Profile,” College Board, 2018.

²⁸ College Board, “Total Group Profile,” College Board, 2017., College Board, “Total Group Profile,” College Board, 2022.

²⁹ Milton Friedman, “The Role of Government in Education,” In *From Economics and the Public Interest* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1955), 2.

³⁰ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics*, Table 401.10 Federal support and estimated federal tax expenditures for education, by category: Selected fiscal years, 1965 through 2020.

³¹ Ibid.

on k-12 education.³² Over \$2 Trillion and increasing education spending by five times the amount it started at, has yet to lead to a better system. There are still calls for more education spending, which was one of the policy proposals called for in the 2023 State of the Union Address.³³ It should be noted that other policy proposals were included in the speech, not just more funding across the board, which is a step in the right direction.

To drill down further into this topic, Table 2 utilizes similar years as the previous discussion on test scores and shows that in 1995, \$54,738,021 was spent on k-12 education, which was 32% of the federal education budget. By 2020, the amount spent had grown by 64% over 15 years. Despite the increase in money spent, k-12 education only took up a fifth of the federal education budget, then a third. Again, these numbers are adjusted for inflation and show a system that has consistently gotten budget increases for five decades. If there is a problem with schools needing money, it does not seem to be a problem of lack of funding, but that the budget is not going where it is intended to go, or funding is going where it should not go.

Table 2: Sample Federal Tax Expenditures for Education (in thousands of dollars)

	1995	2003	2007	2011	2015	2020
K-12						
Spending	54,738,021	82,531,117	87,286,779	85,356,068	85,578,876	89,917,596
% Of						
Education						
Spending	32.73%	33.22%	32.42%	24.41%	26.01%	20.85%

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics*, Table 401.10 Federal support and estimated federal tax expenditures for education, by category: Selected fiscal years, 1965 through 2020.

Finally, Table 3 delineates the reported enrollment of public schools from the same years. Comparisons of the two tables show that the federal government spent a national average of \$1,220.74 in 1995. Fast-forward to 2020, and that number increases by 49% to \$1,821.12. That is an increase of \$600.37 over the twenty-five-year span. The numbers only include federal spending, and many states spend more than this per student. As Table 3 shows, enrollment in public schools was 44,840,000 in 1995 and rose to 49,375,000 by 2020. This is an increase of 10% over the studied timespan, and over the same years, the amount spent on education has increased by 54% more than students entering the system. It is not a matter of more students being in the system means that more money needs to be spent. If the government continued spending at the same level as 1995 per pupil, the budget would only be roughly 60 billion. Tim Goeglein summarizes the issue at hand: “The government can build the most state-of-the-art school ever seen by mankind, but if the students arrive from their homes unequipped – and even in some instances unable to learn – the beauty of the building and scope of the amenities means nothings.”³⁴ As noted by politicians in both parties and the provided data, the current spending levels are not meeting expectations. While smart spending on education is needed to repair the system, other solutions are required first.

³² Department of Education, Federal Support.

³³ Libby Stanford, “Biden Calls for More Mental Health Care at Schools in State of the Union,” Education Week, February 7, 2023, <https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/biden-calls-for-more-mental-health-care-at-schools-in-state-of-the-union/2023/02>.

³⁴ Tim Goeglein, *American Restoration: How Faith, Family, and Personal Sacrifice Can Heal Our Nation*, (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 2019), 91.

Table 3: Enrollment in Public Schools (in thousands)

	1995	2003	2007	2011	2015	2020
Enrollment	44,840	48,540	49,291	49,522	50,438	49,375

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics*, Table 203.10 Enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools, by level and grade: Selected years, fall 1980 through fall 2030.

Restoring the Promise of Education

Education at Home

The first and one of the best solutions to promote student achievement is to promote parental involvement in their children’s education. Children spend the first years of their lives watching their parents and learning how to walk, talk, and regulate their emotions. Parental involvement in education is not meant to end when a child enters preschool or kindergarten, but it is intended to be a lifelong commitment. John Adams, second President of the United States, noted that children need to be educated from birth in Christian principles and their legal duties and rights as citizens.³⁵ The Founding Fathers were a group of highly educated individuals, with individuals such as Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison remarking at various times how essential education was to “the creation of a workable republic” and credited this responsibility not to the government but to the churches and the parents.³⁶ Returning to the founding principles of this country has many answers to what ails the school systems. The role a parent plays in their child’s education cannot be overstated.

Many things cannot be taught in a public school but are meant to be taught by the parents. John Locke wrote extensively about how the family makes up the cornerstone of a healthy society, marriage was the first civil society, then came children.³⁷ “Adam and Eve, and after them, all parents, were by the law of nature under an obligation to preserve, nourish, and educate the children.”³⁸ Locke was one of many influences on the founding fathers, and many of these principles can be seen in early America. Historian Paul Johnson noted that, in early America, “[t]he school supplied Christian ‘character-building’ and the parents, at home, topped it up with whichever sectarian trimmings they thought fit.”³⁹ From religion to education, there was a place for both the schools and the parents. William Bennet noted centuries later that “we must recover the idea that education is about more than making a living. Education’s best claim, William James said, is that it teaches a person to value what deserves to be valued.”⁴⁰

As discussed, a particular factor cannot be taught in schools but by the parents themselves. Next, James Coleman touched on the “intangible” elements that influenced education.⁴¹ This was noted particularly with children entering the classroom for the first time and how “the family’s

³⁵ Paul Johnson, *A History of the American People*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 1999), 208.

³⁶ Johnson, *American People*, 208.

³⁷ John Witte Jr, *The Nature Of Family, The Family Of Nature: The Surprising Liberal Defense Of The Traditional Family In The Enlightenment* *Emory Law Journal*, 64 no. 3 2015: 591-676, accessed February 16, 2019, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1664921660?accountid=12085>, 636-637.

³⁸ John Locke, *John Locke on Politics and Education*, Roslyn, NY: Walter J. Black, Inc., 1947, 25.

³⁹ Johnson, *American People*, 303.

⁴⁰ William Bennet, forward in Joseph Bunting, *An Education for Our Time*, (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 1998), xv.

⁴¹ Coleman, *Educational Opportunity*, iii.

impact on the child affects his receptivity to later experience.”⁴² The report later notes how parental involvement has a minimum impact during the early years when children are in first through third grade; however, the effect increases starting with sixth grade through graduation, suggesting parental interest in their children’s education helps their children succeed.⁴³ To summarize his findings, he writes:

“Taking all these results together, one implication stands out above all: That schools bring little influence to bear on a child’s achievement that is independent of his background and general social context; and that this very lack of independent effect means that the inequalities imposed on children by their home, neighborhood, and peer environment are carried along to become the inequalities with which they confront adult life at the end of school.”⁴⁴

Parents contribute an intangible element that helps prepares their children for success in school and onwards. More recent literature has reached the same conclusions. In a study on student success for the Institute for Family Studies, Bradford Wilcox noted that children growing up in a traditional two-parent household are more likely to achieve academic success and three times less likely to face school suspension or repeat a grade.⁴⁵ “Students’ performance and conduct in school are affected by the intellectual stimulation, emotional support, guidance, and discipline they receive at home.⁴⁶ Parents not only have the mandate to help educate their children, but that data strongly suggests that parental involvement promotes more outstanding performance in schools.

The Bible is also quite clear about the role of parents in education, a view that was highly present in the founding era and still holds today. Proverbs 22:6 “Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old, he will not depart from it.”⁴⁷ Paul called upon the new church in his letter to Ephesus to nurture children in discipline and instruction of the Lord.⁴⁸ While the public school system has abandoned Christian principles, especially in the 20th century, the Biblical principles of parents educating their children should not be abandoned. Centuries of thought, government reports, private studies, and the Bible point to the necessity of parental involvement in education and the duty they have to help educate their children.

Education Locally

The next step for improving education is to move to the next layer of American society, local communities. Families, after all, came together to form the communities that eventually became nations. Unfortunately, with the Department of Education having much power over the purse, the ability of localities to govern education has been diminished. Standardized testing and curriculum, such as common core, means that localities mainly address the specifics of a general plan.

“The U.S. Constitution does not explicitly provide for federal involvement in or control over education policy. The American education system reflects its English heritage in which the church and home were responsible for education. This

⁴² Coleman, *Educational Opportunity*, 300.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 301.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 325.

⁴⁵ J. Bradford Wilcox and Nicholas Zill, “Strong Families, Better Student Performance: The More Things Change, the More They Remain the Same,” American Enterprise Institute, August 16, 2022, <https://www.aei.org/articles/strong-families-better-student-performance-the-more-things-change-the-more-they-remain-the-same/>.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*.

⁴⁷ Proverbs 22:6. (English Standard Version)

⁴⁸ Ephesians 6:4

heritage produced the district school in America. Residents of each independent district decided policy issues relating to education, such as taxes, hiring teachers, school calendar, and curriculum selection ... Federal control over education was viewed as an inappropriate exercise of national power in the early years of the nation.”⁴⁹

The only prominent bill on K-12 education was the Northwest Ordinance, which merely required each “township” to reserve a plot of land to support education and would be the only major federal legislation on this issue until 1941.⁵⁰ For most of America’s first century, the federal government merely provided oversight as needed, not direct control.⁵¹ While the foundations of this model are still preserved, it is unlikely that education will ever return to its earlier constitutional roots.

This does not mean parents should focus only on educating their children at home: the Church should be involved in the process. Matthew 5:13-16 clearly states that Christians should not hide from the world but let the light of God shine through us.⁵² Meg Kilgannon insightfully noted, “When we remove ourselves entirely from the conversation, our worldview perspective is diminished or absent from the system.”⁵³ To put it another way, if concerned parents and Christians do not make themselves part of the conversation, then someone else will fill that hole. Then these citizens cannot predict which policy will come from their local school boards. There are currently 49,375,000 children attending public schools.⁵⁴ These are spread out amongst 98,000 public schools governed by 13,402 school districts.⁵⁵ It is logistically impossible for the Department of Education to manage each of these effectively, even if it wanted to. This gives the 13,000 school districts power over their local schools, and if concerned citizens want to improve education, this is the second step.

Many school boards across the country are elected positions, and many of them are appointed positions. Either way, the list of candidates for these positions is limited to those who express interest. Kilgannon pointed to the same phenomenon seen on College Campuses and how insular some have become.⁵⁶ If there is only one train of thought, one philosophy or worldview, then it should not be surprising if the school board follows these ideas and implements them. These boards are not mere ceremonial positions. For example, the Commonwealth of Virginia includes an extensive list of powers and responsibilities of local school boards in its legal code.⁵⁷ Within the bounds of regulations set by the Federal and State governments, these local school boards can determine the length of the school year, which studies are being pursued, how the classes are taught, and how the individual schools will be governed.⁵⁸ The code later gives Virginia school boards specific liberty to determine which activities students are and are not allowed to participate in.⁵⁹ None of these are particular mundane details. In addition, each state has its ordinances and statutes, giving the school boards authority to govern the schools in their jurisdiction. The next

⁴⁹ Cochran, *American Public Policy*, 281

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 282.

⁵¹ Goeglein, *American Restoration*, 92.

⁵² Matthew 5:13-16

⁵³ Meg Kilgannon, “A Concerned Citizen’s Guide to Engaging with Public Schools,” Family Research Council, 2021, <https://downloads.frc.org/EF/EF21134.pdf>.

⁵⁴ U.S. Department of Education, Enrollment.

⁵⁵ Kilgannon, *Public Schools*.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*.

⁵⁷ Virginia, Code of Virginia, Virginia Code Chapter 7. General Powers and Duties of School Boards. §22.1-71.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*.

question is whether parents influence these school boards and what can be done to improve the system from a local level.

Research has shown that parents are not the only political actors lobbying the school boards. Superintendents, teachers' unions, and teachers communicate with the school boards and provide their opinions. This is not inherently bad, but it can have consequences. Research conducted by the Heritage Foundation found that in Texas in particular, several rural school superintendents often "head the largest employer in their districts, giving them lots of clout ..."⁶⁰ Jay Greene, who conducted the research, later noted that without political organization, it is hard to counter these actors.⁶¹ It is commonly said that those in the room makes decisions.

The original school system in America was run heavily by parents whose children were receiving an education. Part of restoring the promise of education at the local level is to return to this original system, where the parents have a prominent voice in determining the direction of the schools. Over the past few years, "CRT bans" have been introduced in dozens of State legislatures, but it is also noted that this is "ultimately too blunt and far removed tool to effect meaningful change at the classroom level."⁶² There is not a one size fits all solution to what ails the education system around the country. The number of variables in 98,000 public schools is staggering. That is why hard work must be done at the local level for genuine reform.

Education at the State and Federal Levels

Now to return to the role of the Federal government and how to improve the education system at the state and national levels. As demonstrated previously, the federal government was not meant to have a role in education, the constitution did not directly give it the authority, and the early practice of the country was local administration. The most practical way to return to this would be for the state and federal government to embrace a decades-old idea, school choice. Rather than the school a child attends being determined by zip code, the local government and, most notably, the parents would have a greater influence over their children's education.

It is not viable to assume that any one national law or policy would immediately create the ideal education system. With 98,000 public schools, even if each school only had 10 classrooms, that is still 980,000 classrooms with different students and teachers.⁶³ Add in the intangible factors discussed in the Coleman report earlier, and the equation becomes more challenging. School choice programs would instead play into the education system's strengths and lead to better student outcomes.

Milton Friedman wrote in the book *From Economics and the Public Interest*, "Government could require a minimum level of education which they could finance by giving parents vouchers redeemable for a specified maximum sum per child per year if spent on "approved" educational services."⁶⁴ This idea forms the backbone of the school choice movement and first became a reality in Wisconsin in 1990.⁶⁵ With the idea that these vouchers could be used at any school, parents would have the flexibility to choose any school in the area without the cost and expense of moving. Friedman further explored the idea,

⁶⁰ Jay Greene, "School Choice is Poise for Another Victory in Texas," Heritage Foundation. November 30, 2022. <https://www.heritage.org/education/commentary/school-choice-poised-another-victory-texas>.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Kilgannon, Public Schools.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Milton Friedman, *Economics and the Public Interest*, (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1955), 3.

⁶⁵ Heritage Foundation, "About the Report Card," Heritage Foundation, 2022, <https://www.heritage.org/educationreportcard/pages/about.html>.

“Parents could express their views about schools directly, by withdrawing their children from one school and sending them to another, to a much greater extent than is now possible. ... Here, as in other fields, competitive private enterprise is likely to be far more efficient in meeting consumer demands than either nationalized enterprises or enterprises run to serve other purposes. The final result may therefore well be less rather than more parochial education.”⁶⁶

To summarize, if there were four major high schools in a city, with two having a history of high test scores and high levels of college admissions, parents would try to enroll their students there. The other two schools either must improve their standards or risk losing their students to a new fifth school opening or outright closing due to low enrollment. It is not a perfect solution; there is no guarantee that new schools will continue to open, for example, but for the first century of America, the localities did a decent job creating new schools. Moreover, the American economy has proven that new businesses will appear where money can be made. Friedman made one final point that is worth mentioning, the role of the federal government as inspectors, “much as it now inspects restaurants to assure that they maintain minimum sanitary standards.⁶⁷ Checks and balances were a significant part of how the founding fathers arranged the government, and this idea would allow for a check on all three levels.

The individual States would best spearhead the school choice movement. For one thing, they are granted that power by the Constitution. Supreme Justice Louis Brandeis provides another benefit of leaving policy to the states: “a single courageous State may, if its citizens choose, serve as a laboratory; and try novel social and economic experiments without risk to the rest of the country.”⁶⁸ Even if the worst possible scenario occurs when a policy is made, if it was enacted in, say, Oregon, the impact would only be on the children of Oregon, not the entire nation. The final reason the state governments should lead the charge is that the individual states have already been working on this issue. In the past ten years alone, the number of school choice programs has increased by 52% as demand continues.⁶⁹ In AY 2022-23, between all the programs (excluding two currently blocked by circuit courts), there were up to 688,162 students eligible for one or more school choice programs.⁷⁰ This includes ten states that have created Education Savings Account (ESA) programs, similar to school vouchers but offer parents even greater flexibility.⁷¹ Arizona elected to serve as a “laboratory” and became the first state with a universal ESA program.⁷² Of the 5,486,000 students reported attending a private school, only 12.54% could be doing so with a government program.⁷³ There is much more room to expand and grow these programs.

⁶⁶ Friedman, *Economics*, 4-5.

⁶⁷ Friedman, *Economics*, 3.

⁶⁸ Benjamin Scafidi and Eric Wearne, “EFI Charter School Ecosystem Rankins,” Education Freedom Institute, December 2021, <https://secureservercdn.net/45.40.149.34/n5e.cd2.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/EFI-ECER2022f.pdf>.

⁶⁹ Ed Choice, “The ABCs of School Choice: The Comprehensive Guide to Every Private School Choice program in America, 2023 Edition,” Ed Choice, January 25, 2023, <https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/2023-ABCs-WEB.pdf>.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Heritage Foundation, Report Card.

⁷² Ed Choice, “ABCs”.

⁷³ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics*, Table 205.10 Private elementary and secondary school enrollment and private enrollment as a percentage of total enrollment in public and private schools, by region and grade level: Selected years, fall 1995 through fall 2019.

One final note on the school choice system is also the matter of costs. The prevalent idea is that funding these measures takes away from public school funding, which would only further the decline. But these policies, if crafted well, allow use on both public and private use. As noted, Friedman speculated that private schools might even lower under a proper school choice plan. According to estimates made of the AY 22-23 school years, states will spend \$3,994,769,368 on the various programs.⁷⁴ That is 4.44% of the amount that the Federal government spent in 2020, and given the trend, the amount is more likely to be higher than lower in 2022. Program funding would need to increase by 22x to equal the federal government's spending. This is without calculating any potential gains from more efficient schools. There is much room to grow this policy area, which would greatly benefit the students.

From the Ground Up

America's education system faces the growing dissatisfaction of parents who no longer feel they have a voice; all the while, the test scores are declining, and spending is far outpacing student enrollment. Thomas Jefferson highlighted the reasonable and achievable goals of the country's education system. Literacy training, expanding access to education and ensuring that American leaders did not have to travel to Europe for quality education.⁷⁵ Times have changed since America's founding, but enduring principles remain. The basic goal of the education system that every child is given equality of opportunity remains. Parents being involved in their children's educations provides a check to falling education standards and inappropriate content being taught. With the parents involved in their children's education, the next level is getting involved in the management of the local school systems. To encourage good governance of every school and to help ensure these schools prepare students for their futures. Finally, the federal and state government can provide needed oversight of the system, opening the door for competition and for families to have the freedom to make the best choice for their children. Unfortunately, the U.S. education system is too complicated for a one size fits all solution. It is not money that will restore the promise of education; it is building a strong foundation from the ground up.

⁷⁴ Ed Choice, "ABCs".

⁷⁵ Cochran, American Public Policy, 281.

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