



RESEARCH REPORT | Center for Education Opportunity and Center for 1776

ACCOUNTABILITY IN AMERICA'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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TOPLINE POINTS

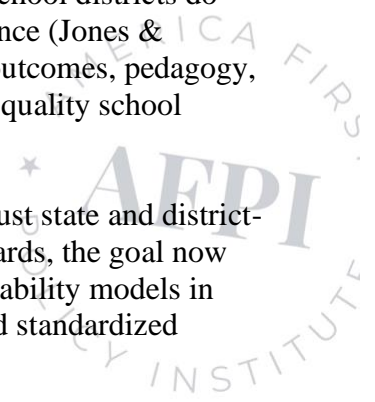
- Despite mandated accountability measures to foster academic improvement, student academic performance in public schools has reached a 30-year low. Students consistently fall below proficiency levels set by the National Assessment of Educational Progress ([NAEP](#)) in core subjects.
- To restore the quality of education, states should promote accountability in school districts through enhanced transparency, increased parental involvement, improved teacher training, and abolishment of teacher tenure.
- Accountability does not require imposing uniformity. States must be empowered to prioritize variables that demonstrably affect student success. This means moving beyond the “check the box” mentality of traditional accountability models and embracing a data-driven approach.
- Improved accountability can improve student outcomes. The U.S. has the potential to lead the world in educational outcomes, but it ranks 14th globally. The absence of effective mechanisms to hold educators and the education system accountable hinders our ability to excel.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed longstanding issues in America's public schools, many of which have been exacerbated by flaws in current accountability models. While this crisis has resulted in some states making legislative efforts to increase transparency, little attention has been paid to accountability.

While the federal government furnishes accountability guidelines, many states and school districts do not have comprehensive systems for assessing district, school, and student performance (Jones & Brown, 2021). This shortfall affects all aspects of the educational system—student outcomes, pedagogy, administration, and parent awareness. It is compounded by radical curriculum, poor-quality school boards, and lack of parental involvement.

Both past and current federal guidelines are insufficient and largely ineffective. Robust state and district-level accountability systems are needed. Rather than reinstating pre-pandemic standards, the goal now should be to make schools better than ever. To realize this ambitious vision, accountability models in school systems need rebuilding (Johnson, 2023). Empowering states to move beyond standardized



federal requirements is a prerequisite to making changes for teachers, students, parents, and state leaders in education. This research report will provide information about the federal requirements for k-12 accountability, the shared public governance of education in America, and potential solutions to reform the accountability framework to better assess and guide improved outcomes for students.

EVERY STUDENT SUCCEEDS ACT ACCOUNTABILITY MODELS IN K–12 EDUCATION

Students, parents, and teachers rely on accurate reporting to understand their districts, schools, or grades. These entities are accountable to those they serve, but the current procedure has proven insufficient and even inaccurate. In K–12 education, accountability models are mandated by the U.S. Department of Education (DOED) through the Every Student Succeeds Act ([ESSA](#)), formerly known as the No Child Left Behind ([NCLB](#)) Act. ESSA stipulates that all students should receive an education that equips them for success in society ([U.S. Dept of Education, 2015](#)). Consequently, every school across the Nation is subject to an annual evaluation and report card. These evaluations hinge on five key indicators: academic achievement, student growth in reading and math, graduation rate (for high schools only), progress toward English language proficiency (ELP), and school quality and student success (SQSS). When ESSA was in the legislative pipeline in 2015, policymakers were optimistic that more state autonomy and diverse metrics would strengthen accountability. However, ESSA has not resulted in strengthened accountability or improved academic outcomes.

Under ESSA, states must ensure they will meet the requirements of the statute and any applicable regulations. Research offers insight into how these accountability measures work at the state level. A 2022 study found that states follow different policy paths that reflect their own interests and concerns ([Portz & Beauchamp, 2020](#)). It found that state-level political orientation correlated with the policies adopted by states. Politically liberal states were more likely to emphasize SQSS measures, with a focus on tracking progress over time rather than targeting an absolute level of attainment. States with a more conservative leaning maintained a focus on student test scores. Additionally, well-resourced states, regardless of political leaning, faced less pressure overall to change policies or programs ([Portz & Beauchamp, 2020](#)). ESSA requires that state-determined measures be supported by research indicating that improvement in such measures is likely to increase student learning.

Rating schools and districts makes the information easily understood, as required by ESSA. However, combining indicators such as student achievement and high school graduation into a composite has not proven effective in measuring school performance ([Portz & Beauchamp, 2020](#)). Combining metrics to determine a letter grade (A–F) oversimplifies education, making it difficult to establish what is needed for each school. A single rating is insufficient to determine whether current systems are improving education outcomes, and such ratings cannot accurately summarize school performance. States should offer robust, multi-indicator accountability systems for public schools, but many have done the opposite. Clearly, the mandates have not provided the desired results for schools or students.

The intention behind ESSA was to allow states to foster student improvement. However, changes to accountability metrics can affect school ratings while not reflecting changes in school performance. A 2016 study indicated, for example, that after Oklahoma changed its formula for rating schools, the number of C schools dropped from 21 percent to 5 percent, and the number of F schools increased from 8 percent to 53 percent—even though school demographics remained similar and average math and reading achievement were stable ([Sunderman, 2022](#)). Accountability rating systems may be designed to improve perceptions without making meaningful changes. For example, Florida first adopted



an A–F system in 1999, when 12 percent of schools received an A rating. Following a series of rule changes, the percentage of schools receiving As rose to 53 percent in 2005. A simulation showed that if earlier rating rules had been applied, grades would not have risen in such a way. Because school ratings are highly visible, they can exert a strong influence on public perceptions of the schools, whether or not they accurately assess school performance.

COVID-19 brought unprecedented learning challenges that made it difficult to meet ESSA requirements. Consequently, all 50 states were granted waivers by DOED that exempted them from state accountability requirements, including assessments under the ESSA, school identification procedures, and related reporting obligations for the 2020–21 academic year. While these waivers provided temporary relief, removing ESSA requirements opened the door for further deterioration and may be a cause of the current disparity in National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores among fourth- and eighth-grade students. Unfortunately, the effects of these pandemic-era decisions will continue to pose difficulties for accountability rating systems in the years ahead.

The shift from traditional face-to-face learning to digital or hybrid learning introduced disparities in students' educational experiences, primarily influenced by their access to internet services and computers, their ability to adapt to and engage with online learning, and their level of participation. Educators also approached online instruction in varying ways, often lacking standardized school or district guidelines. This instructional variability likely contributed to the recent 30-year low in national test scores.

ESSA exists to give states flexibility but also to hold them accountable, especially during times of vulnerability and crisis. These guidelines are theoretically in place so that states can set their own goals and measurements of interim progress, but unfortunately, many states are either struggling to comply or not seeing positive results after checking the boxes.

Accountability measures should be designed and implemented at the state level. States receive federal funding and establish policies for schools, which warrants that they be directly responsible for school accountability. A one-size-fits-all federal accountability model is counterproductive. Instead, states should be empowered to design their own systems, tailored to their specific contexts, through a rigorous, peer-reviewed process with support from DOED. State plans should detail their systems' design process, implementation strategies, and continuous improvement mechanisms. Notably, states should hold themselves accountable for supporting districts and schools, creating a reciprocal relationship. The current accountability system in education, heavily reliant on federal regulation and standardized testing, applied uniformly across states and districts, has demonstrably failed to produce the desired outcomes. Moving beyond the obsession with a one-size-fits-all approach is crucial for creating improved student outcomes.

Despite ESSA's goal of empowering states to improve accountability, the current system falls short. States prioritize different metrics, oversimplify data with letter grades, and manipulate formulas, leading to inaccurate assessments and failing to foster positive student outcomes. A shift toward state-led, flexible, and context-specific accountability systems, supported by federal guidance and reciprocal responsibility, is necessary to break free from the limitations of standardized testing and truly elevate student success.

The COVID-19 pandemic has plunged American education into crisis, leaving a generation vulnerable to lasting learning losses. To combat this two vital actions are needed: heightened



transparency and sharpened accountability. Firstly, Congress and states must enforce existing federal mandates for monitoring student performance, providing crucial data to assess the damage and guide effective interventions. Secondly, as educational choice expands, assessment systems must modernize. Tests should reflect current curricula and deliver timely, actionable data on student progress and school performance to both educators and parents, empowering them to personalize learning and hold schools accountable. By embracing transparency through accessible data and strengthening accountability through modernized assessments, we can equip educators, parents, and communities with the tools needed to help children rebound from learning losses and build a more effective K-12 system for all families.

RADICAL CURRICULUM AND DIMINISHED PARENTAL RIGHTS—A RESULT OF FAILING ACCOUNTABILITY

Even when it is well-established that a school or school system is failing, they face little consequence, and parents have little recourse or power to change anything. Unfortunately, this pattern of decline extends to the classroom. A lack of teacher and school board accountability in public schools has contributed to ineffective curricula and presented the opportunity for harmful, radical teachings to infiltrate the classroom. Student outcomes, educational quality, and satisfaction have suffered as a result. For example, the class of 2023 had the worst national ACT performance in 30 years, and test scores across all ages have dropped to record lows since COVID-19. Also, 42 percent of students failed to meet any subject benchmarks in English, reading, science, and math ([Allen & Radunzel, 2017](#)).

Despite these failings, the National Council of Teachers of English ([NCTE](#)) has proposed that states place less emphasis on pre-existing literacy standards and instead incorporate activist teachings of “race, antiracism, anti-Blackness, and LGBTQIA+” in K–12 classrooms. The curriculum, called “[culturally and historically responsive education](#),” would force students to learn about power, oppression, antiracism, race, gender, class, sexuality, and diverse religions rather than emphasizing core subjects starting in preschool.

NCTE claims that the existing curriculum has been centered around “whiteness and white representation” and “neglects inclusion of Black and Brown lives.” The organization’s new proposal (set to make changes in 2024) encourages English teachers to take courses in their personal time that unpack their implicit biases, oppressive ideologies, and internalized oppression so they “can better teach equity, power, control, justice, freedom, (mis)representation, oppression, exploitation, marginalization, and empowerment” ([Gross, 2021](#)). This influential teacher organization is pushing a race-based agenda at the expense of students, despite parents opposing it at local school board meetings and several states banning the curriculum, and nobody is holding them accountable.

In Maryland, Montgomery County Public Schools ([MCPS](#)) are pushing a radical agenda that is harming students. In 2021, the district spent more than \$450,000 on an “anti-racist audit,” which resulted in policies that push “anti-racist thinking” in preschool ([LeChance, 2021](#)). The district also will require students to read certain LGBTQ+ books as part of their new English and Language Arts curriculum next year.

Parents were outraged and united at a recent school board meeting at which they asked to be able to opt their children out of reading these books. This was a plea for the district to provide students with a quality education that focuses on student achievement instead of pushing a left-wing political



agenda. In response, the school board belittled these parents' rights by denying their request and limiting their participation at a school board meeting. Children in MCPS will now be required to engage with LGBTQ+ material in the 2023-2024 academic year, and their parents do not have a say in the matter ([America First Parents, 2023](#)).

Baltimore schools recently [announced](#) that “zero students passed their state math exams,” but this has not stopped the district from placing radical ideology above core subjects such as reading and arithmetic. In 2021, the Baltimore City Schools received \$1.6 billion from taxpayers, the most ever. The district also received \$799 million in COVID-19 relief funding from the federal government. Moreover, still, not a single student who was tested at 13 city high schools scored proficient on the state math test.

Even as educational achievement deteriorates, schools have invested in promoting gender ideology within the curriculum. The Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center ([MAP](#)) hosted a four-hour online workshop during which more than 30 teachers discussed how to help students transition genders without informing their parents. MAP is funded by DOED through taxpayer dollars but is actively trying to evade laws meant to protect children and honor parental rights. Some teachers on the call shared tips on how to hide a transgender student's new name and gender from the student's parents without considering that an “affirm-early/affirm-often” approach is not the only way to help a trans-identifying student ([Reinl, 2023](#)). This is a violation of parental rights and a blatant disregard for parents' primacy in raising their children.

In Colorado, an organization called Colorado Parent Advocacy Network ([CPAN](#)) has shown that information is not always shared with parents and that educators are not always honest about withholding it. In Colorado's Cherry Creek District (one of the largest districts in the Nation), a teacher was using the pronouns requested by a student, and the student's parents were not informed. When confronted by CPAN leader Lori Gimelshteyn, the superintendent first denied this occurred, then backtracked.

This is happening in schools across the country. Some even have written policies stating that teachers are not to divulge information to parents. It is imperative to examine the relationships among school boards, teachers, and parents to solve the layered accountability problems resulting in worse student outcomes and diminished parental rights.

PUBLIC SCHOOL GOVERNANCE—A BALANCING ACT BETWEEN SCHOOL BOARDS, GOVERNMENTS, AND PARENTS

While states are delegated certain responsibilities when it comes to accountability measures, school boards are often central to implementation. Moreover, they are the touchpoint among parents, students, and faculty members. Therefore, they also act as mediator when needed and discipline guilty parties when appropriate. Having vigilant school boards that respect parents is key to addressing all the issues referenced in the report thus far.

America's School Boards

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, it was rare to see a school board election or action receive national press coverage, but increased transparency due to online learning during the pandemic has brought heightened attention to America's school boards—and rightfully so. School boards play a critical role in



accountability in America's schools. Some of the most fundamental responsibilities of America's school board members are to:

- *Approve curriculum* and textbooks based on standards, goals, and policies adopted by the board.
- *Review and evaluate curriculum* as it relates to student assessment results.
- Hire and *hold the superintendent* of the school district *accountable*.
- create a *responsible budget* and tax rate to advance the educational success of the students in the board's district.
- Provide parents and community members *transparency* on what is occurring in their local schools.
- Empower parents and community members to effectively hold the board *accountable* when adopting curricula, budgets, and policies.

School boards have a crucial role in effective school governance. According to the National School Board Association (NSBA), school boards are expected to “commit to a vision of high expectations for student achievement and quality instruction and define clear goals toward that vision” ([NSBA, 2019](#)). However, many boards fail to fulfill this basic requirement. At the 2018 MTSBA meeting, it was noted that in low-achieving districts, board members are not fully aware of school improvement initiatives ([MTSBA 2018 Annual Meeting Packet, 2023](#)). If school board members are not even aware of initiatives, they cannot hold schools and district officials accountable for implementing them, and low-achieving schools may fall further behind. Electing engaged school board members with a vision of educational excellence can improve accountability in America's schools.

State Board of Education Oversight

Local school boards are not always the final authority. Each state has a state board of education (BOE) that oversees various aspects of the education system. This oversight ranges from “general supervision” to establishing a curriculum (Education Commission, 2020). Some states' BOEs oversee accountability systems. Some states, either through the BOE or other means, can take over a district if the local district is failing. In 2023, Houston Independent School District's leadership was replaced by a state-appointed board of managers after low student ratings and possible misconduct by school board members (Méndez, 2023). This threat can place pressure on districts to prioritize student success.

Federal Government Enforcement Mechanisms

Currently, the primary mechanism of accountability frequently employed by the federal government is tying funding to specific policies they wish states to enforce. This can be used in an attempt to improve student outcomes or, as we have seen in recent years, weaponized to advance a political agenda. A recent illustrative example of this occurred in 2022 when the Biden Administration's Department of Agriculture [announced](#) updated policies related to gender identity, some of which permitted transgender students to use restrooms aligned with their preferred gender ([U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2022](#)). Non-compliance with these policies could jeopardize a school's eligibility for funding under the National School Lunch program, which serves nearly 30 million children daily ([U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2022](#)). This case exemplifies how out-of-control policies and threats from the federal government can impede states' abilities to succeed.



Parental Rights

Parents and teachers both have great influence on children. In fact, the American Psychological Association found that parental involvement in education was “positively related to children’s social and emotional adjustment” ([Barger et al., 2019](#)). A lack of transparency in our schools has resulted in minimal parental involvement in almost every facet of the accountability process and has contributed to dysfunctional, ineffective schools.

Both Congress and the Supreme Court have long recognized parental rights in their children’s education. Federal legislation ensures that parents have a right to know what happens in the classroom concerning their children. According to 20 U.S.C. 6318, which became law in 2013, parents have the right to regular parent-teacher conferences, the right to observe the activities being performed in class, and access to any survey materials about their children (20 U.S.C. § 6318; 20 U.S.C § 1232h). Meanwhile, the Supreme Court, in a host of opinions, has upheld parental rights. Specifically, the Court has stated that “the institution of the family is deeply rooted in this Nation’s history and tradition” and “the interest of parents in the care, custody, and control of their children—is perhaps the oldest of the fundamental liberty interests recognized by this Court” ([Moore v. East Cleveland, 431 U.S. 494 \(1977\)](#); [Troxel v. Granville, 530 U.S. 57 \(2000\)](#)). However, local school districts have continuously ignored federal policies and the American legal tradition that establish parental rights and instead have put policies in place to hide information from parents. States should act to codify parental rights so that accountability measures in schools can be enforced.

School Choice

Research suggests a positive correlation between the availability of school choice and stronger academic outcomes for students. The body of research on private school choice overwhelmingly points to its favorable impact. States that offer school choice demonstrate improvements in academic outcomes of students, not only for participating students but also for those in public schools, and it results in cost savings for taxpayers. In states with school choice, the role of parents in selecting where their child attends school is vital to ensuring schools are held accountable.

The White House Council of Economic Advisors notes that competition brings about better-quality services ([The Council of Economic Advisers, 2020](#)). Offering families more educational choices has a more substantial impact on student achievement than either augmenting funding or reducing class sizes ([Wolf et al., 2021](#)). Furthermore, the extent of the positive effect of educational freedom on student learning is associated with a substantial increase in median household income. By enabling the parent to choose where the student attends, schools are held accountable via competition, and the result is often improved educational quality for all students.

Within the vast landscape of more than 12,000 school districts across the U.S., it is imperative to include parents, who are the most prominent champions for their children, in efforts to enhance accountability. Parents assume the crucial roles of grassroots advocates and vigilant overseers of accountability. Their significance emanates not only from their close and pre-established connections with educational institutions but also from their profound vested interest in witnessing continuous improvements within the school district for the sake of their children.



States need to reimagine their accountability models with support from DOED to accurately convey schools' strengths and weaknesses. This is critical to helping address the record-low student outcomes being seen nationwide. To fully combat the problem, though, this is not enough. Solutions must also be implemented to improve school and teacher accountability and to inform parents. A robust set of solutions encompassing state actions, school boards, teachers, and parents is crucial to solving this multifaceted problem.

State Legislative Solutions

More than 85 bills in 26 states have been aimed at expanding parental rights and fostering transparency in public schools, and such bills have passed in Florida, Arizona, Georgia, and Louisiana ([DiMarco, 2022](#)).

Some bills, such as [Missouri HB 1858](#), include clauses that allow parents the right to review all materials and allow them to “visit the school and check in on their minor child during school hours.” Governor Ron DeSantis of Florida has put forward one of the most comprehensive bills to foster accountability. [HB 1467](#) requires school districts to be transparent in the selection of instructional materials, including library and reading materials. It does the following:

- Establishes a transparent and consistent process for public participation in the review of books and other materials used in school lessons and in the school library.
- Requires school districts to provide notice for school board meetings and have them open to the public when the board is selecting instructional materials.
- Provides access to all materials at least 20 days before the school board taking official action on them.
- Establishes 12-year term limits for school board members to prevent unchanging political boards.

With the help of parents and lawmakers, shifting from radical theories to longstanding educational principles can improve educational outcomes, specifically in core subjects.

Many existing bills provide both common and unique policies that promote accountability in the school district.

These policies include:

- [Placing](#) all instructional materials and curriculum online for parents to review.
- [Requiring](#) library vendors to place age-appropriate ratings on materials based on sexual content and prohibiting the sale of sexually explicit materials.
- [Auditing](#) teacher preparation programs regularly to ensure they do not advocate for radical curriculum and requiring boards to discontinue approval of any programs that disparage American values, present revisionist history, or teach critical social justice.
- [Enabling](#) parents to obtain vouchers to be used at a school of their choosing, including if they find a teacher who continually teaches a radical curriculum.

Model policies like these will help hold school boards accountable by giving the public opportunities to monitor the actions of the school board and teachers and contribute to decision-making.



School Board Solutions

Increased Accountability of School Boards

Improving school boards by increasing voter turnout and strengthening school board member training is another key to restoring accountability. Voter turnout for school board elections is often low due to off-cycle school board elections ([Maciag, 2014](#)). This can lead to ineffective boards that do not truly represent the interests of their communities. In fact, a Ballotpedia study found that between 2018 and 2021, between 24 and 40 percent of school board candidates ran unopposed each year ([School Board Elections, 2022](#)). These elections should be moved to on-cycle (November of even years when Federal elections occur) so that voters, and particularly parents, can have their views better represented. Not only will on-cycle elections improve school board quality, but they will also improve student outcomes ([National School Board Association, 2020](#)). Elected members should also be trained in reviewing curriculum to ensure that students have access to “curricula that provide evidence of positive impact on student outcomes over a period of time” ([America First Policy Institute, 2021](#)). School board members should be focused on effectively communicating with teachers and parents and making informed decisions based on facts. Students and educational outcomes—not politics—should always be top of mind for boards.

Local School Board Solutions

Ultimately, America’s education system should not be governed with a top-down approach but rather through a federalist system in which school districts and the state share authority and work hand-in-hand to improve the education system. Keeping the school board accountable is important, and the school board must then keep the district accountable. The primary way this objective can be met is by the hiring of the district’s superintendent.

The superintendent, in turn, is responsible for district accountability, including financial accountability, because public schools are funded by taxpayer dollars.

The private sector’s solution to financial efficiency is audits. One example of using this tool in the public schools is Houston’s new superintendent, Mike Miles, initiating audits of districts to find “excess teachers”—when a district is employing too many teachers at a high cost ([Lodhia, 2023](#)). Audits are essential to a school district because, by allocating resources responsibly, districts can afford to pay higher wages to higher-performing teachers ([Stone & Peetz, 2023](#)).

Teacher Solutions

Appropriate Teacher Training

To bolster accountability in the education system, teacher ethics training overseen by superintendents both before and during a teacher’s tenure emerges as a highly effective strategy. To bolster accountability in the education system, teacher ethics training overseen by superintendents and provided directly by principals, both before and during a teacher’s tenure, emerges as a highly effective strategy. Ensuring quality superintendents requires improving and strengthening school boards. As articulated by Rosa L. Weaver, a former principal, and author of *What Principals Need to Know About Ethics*, teachers often receive inadequate ethics training. School leaders, particularly principals, should create opportunities for teachers to discuss ethical dilemmas. This includes instilling in educators a profound sense of responsibility for their actions, particularly in delivering lessons that are developmentally appropriate and that meet the needs of students and families ([Weaver, 2007](#)).



Effective teacher ethics training includes instilling a strong sense of accountability—for adherence to curriculum guidelines, diligent student supervision, fostering constructive relationships with parents, upholding parental rights, and cultivating a positive and open learning environment. In the absence of comprehensive teacher training and ethics, especially tailored to individual schools, there is a risk of educators tampering with the curriculum. School administrators must establish clear expectations by providing teachers with conduct guidelines, mandating compliance with state protocols outlined in ESSA, establishing minimum performance standards based on their state’s NAEP proficiency benchmarks, and enforcing strict consequences for any deviations from prescribed classroom practices.

Abolishing K–12 Teacher Tenure

Tenure is another aspect of the education system that should be examined and abolished. While many conflate K-12 tenure with higher education tenure, the two systems operate differently and have different purposes. In higher education, tenure was initiated to protect the integrity of research and ensure that truth is pursued. A 1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure notes that “teachers are entitled to freedom in the classroom in discussing their subjects, but they should be careful not to introduce into their teaching controversial matter which has no relation to their subject” ([AAUP, 2014](#)). While the rationale for tenure in higher education is clearer, its presence lacks justification in K–12 schools.

Tenure has enabled lower rates of teacher performance and spawned a movement aimed at abolishing tenure. So far, 18 states have started to revise tenure laws, while Florida and North Carolina have sought to eliminate tenure altogether ([Khalenberg, 2014](#)). The *Resilient Educator Journal* lists certain issues with teacher tenure at the K–12 level: “Poorly performing teachers are difficult to fire, (it) makes seniority more important than quality, collective bargaining rights and existing laws already protect teachers and nearly every teacher gets tenure” ([Resilient Educator, 2012](#)). This creates a stark contrast with tenure in higher education, which requires at least six years in the profession, publishing of original research, and a comprehensive review.

The grant of tenure does not always require proof or performance metrics, so in many states, there is no way to tell how well a teacher is fulfilling the teacher’s duties. According to the National Council on Teacher Quality, “Of the 45 states with tenure policies, only 22 have any sort of explicit performance requirement that a teacher must meet in order to earn tenure or non-probationary status” ([Gerber, 2020](#)). Even when metrics are in place, they tend to be non-comprehensive and exclude student outcomes. This means that when tenure is offered, teachers are given a guarantee of employment without a requirement to meet any explicit performance requirement. This is alarming, as most states provide tenure after just three years of employment.

A 2020 survey by Educators for Excellence found that teachers are open to changing traditional tenure, pay, and retirement structures. In fact, the survey showed that 72 percent of teachers are willing to trade tenure for higher pay ([Educators for Excellence, 2023](#)). So, in the end, tenure appears to serve no one’s interests—not school districts that wish to adhere to education quality standards, not the teachers who would willingly shelve it for pay-for-performance standards, and especially not students who deserve an education system that is aimed at protecting the quality of their education, not the employment status of teachers. Therefore, tenure should be abolished in K–12 education.

Reining in the Teacher Unions



Teacher unions have incredible sway over school boards, which can lead to school boards often prioritizing the teacher over quality education for students. Stanford Professor Terry Moe explained this point when he wrote:

School-board elections are supposed to be the democratic means by which ordinary citizens govern their own schools. The board is supposed to represent “the people.” But in many districts, it really doesn’t. For with unions so powerful, employee interests are given far more weight in personnel and policy decisions than warranted, and school boards are partially captured by their own employees. Democracy threatens to be little more than a charade, serving less as a mechanism of popular control than as a means by which employees promote their own special interests (Moe, 2006).

At first glance, one might expect teacher unions to focus on promoting teachers’ interests against governing boards; however, the truth is that the largest unions in America do not stand up for the teachers and their profession but are interest groups that promote radical agendas and decrease the boards’ focus on student success. For instance, in the case of the New Jersey Education Association, substantial political spending in 2018, as highlighted by Lilley (2021), amounted to \$64 million, translating to more than \$500 per full-time teacher. Lilley also pointed out that the annual increase in teacher dues outpaces salary increases, resulting in unions accumulating wealth while teachers’ financial well-being stagnates.

From 1990 through February 2019, the National Education Association (NEA) contributed nearly \$143.5 million to federal candidates and committees, 97 percent in support of Democrats. According to the Center for Responsive Politics, the NEA was the second-largest contributor to political campaigns of any individual, corporation, or union in 2014. Then again, in 2016, the Americans for Fair Treatment (AFT) and NEA collectively gave \$64 million in political contributions.

In a study conducted by Michigan State University, authors reviewed 30 years of research to understand how teacher unions impact teacher pay, student achievement, and district spending. They found that unions spent money in very different ways, reflecting the discrepancies in unions and their failure to use funds effectively. They also found that students in unionized districts have higher dropout rates and lower math and reading proficiency rates. Another study conducted by AFT found that NEA spent more than twice as much money on political activities and lobbying expenditures as on its members ([Gonzales, 2022](#)).

NEA has failed in its original mission to prioritize high-quality children’s education. If they have replaced this goal with an effort to consistently place the interests of progressive teacher unions over students’ learning. In 2021, the NEA adopted measures supporting critical race theory and threatened strikes to keep school doors closed during COVID-19. To address this, support for the passage of bills such as the National Education Association Charter Repeal Act must increase. This bill would take a necessary step toward revoking NEA’s charter for such a grave misuse of resources while also seeking to disavow the organization’s woke indoctrination attempts.

Laurie Todd-Smith, Ph.D., director of the Center for Education Opportunity at the America First Policy Institute, states, “As a former public-school teacher, I have always assumed that my dues were being used to support me in the classroom and advocate for my best interests. I was shocked to learn that 97 percent of the funds from our dues are used to support Democratic candidates in elections across the United States.”



The role unions play in the lives of children across this country is immeasurable. If unions spend their donations on politics rather than on educational needs, it is not clear how they can fulfill the goal of the American education system: to educate children, not advance political agendas. Children deserve leaders driven not by political allegiance but by a commitment to advancing the minds of the Nation's youth.

Parent Solutions

Video Cameras in Classrooms—renewed transparency in America's schools

Another mechanism to ensure teacher accountability is video recording in classrooms. According to Friendship Circle of Michigan, an educational non-profit, cameras allow teachers to “review video of lessons taught to evaluate strengths of lesson and areas for improvement” ([Embury, 2017](#)). Recording classes also allows for more parent participation and feedback, especially on curriculum content. Kaplan Learning Center recommends that cameras be used to “keep parents informed of the everyday happenings in class by sharing photos and videos” ([Kaplan, 2014](#)). Most importantly, though, recordings can be reviewed when teachers—or students—break protocol. Without records to prove wrongdoings, students have no way to defend themselves.

Placing cameras in classrooms would not assume the worst of teachers and students but the best. Parents could access footage of their children to track their progress and see what they are being taught. Studies also show that cameras are a reliable way to assess wrongdoing ([West-Rosenthal, 2017](#)). This takes out the guesswork and ensures accountability while bolstering parental rights. Without cameras, parents have no access to the classroom and no way to defend their children. The cost of these cameras would vary and depend on school and classroom size. Cameras that are customary in smaller schools with fewer and smaller classrooms typically cost between \$500 and \$1,000, while larger spaces require high-resolution cameras that cost more. The total cost of the surveillance system would be dependent on the number and quality of cameras used ([Gul, 2021](#)).

Cameras in classrooms also may increase overall safety. According to School Leaders Now, a recent survey found that “70% of educators felt cameras in the classroom could be useful in preventing theft, vandalism, and cheating” ([West-Rosenthal, 2017](#)). Friendship Circle of Michigan also notes that school districts with cameras in hallways and other community areas have seen a decline in the number of bullying complaints from parents, teachers, and students. Video footage gives teachers and professionals a resource to track and discuss inappropriate classroom behavior with students, so cameras in classrooms can improve all students' physical and emotional safety at school.

Cameras in classrooms have notable support. According to an August 2023 Scott Rasmussen National Survey of registered voters, 61 percent of registered voters support placing video cameras in public school classrooms to help ensure student and teacher accountability. Also, 82 percent of registered voters who favor video cameras in classrooms believe it is appropriate to put cameras in high school classrooms. Dr. Todd-Smith said, “As a former public-school teacher, I believe that placing video cameras in classrooms would benefit teachers, students, and parents. I have always felt so proud of my lesson plans and activities in my classroom, and I like the thought that others could see the amazing work of my students. I also think teachers would be able to review their class sessions, students could reference the videos as needed, and parents would have full, much-needed access to the materials their children are being taught day-to-day.”



Increased Parental Involvement

Even if parents are unable to hold schools accountable with school choice, they can get involved in other ways. Parents can strengthen school accountability by:

- Attending school board meetings and speaking during public comment to inform elected officials about possible school failures.
- Contacting or meeting with specific school board members. This can provide parents the opportunity to understand their elected officials better and ask questions.
- Obtaining the curriculum being taught to students through open records requests.
- Voting in local school board elections.
- Contacting the state BOE directly. The ESSA requires each state's education department to create and enforce accountability standards. Reaching out to the board members can enable parents to gain an understanding and provide ideas for new accountability policies.
- Joining local and state education committees. In many districts, local school district committees aid the school board in curriculum adoption and other district policies. This would place parents in an authoritative position to aid in district accountability directly.
- Running for a position on the school board.

CONCLUSION

The post-pandemic education landscape presents America with a critical imperative to address the failing accountability models being implemented in states. While such reforms would help to present a more accurate picture of student outcomes, other changes need to be made as well to increase parental involvement and help schools function optimally. As the Nation addresses declining test scores and dysfunctional school boards, federal guidelines are insufficient, and increasing the administrative burden imposed by the federal government is not an adequate solution. By focusing on the right variables and fostering a culture of data-informed decision-making, we can create a system that appropriately supports and empowers states to improve student outcomes. States should be the architects of their own success. It is imperative to address the multifaceted problems with current accountability models. Achieving this ambitious vision requires comprehensively reconstructing accountability models and aligning them with the evolving needs of students, parents, and society. It is through such efforts that we can chart a course toward a brighter and more accountable future for our students and families.



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