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Curricula: What Parents Need to Know to Get More Involved



CURRICULA: WHAT PARENTS NEED TO KNOW TO GET MORE INVOLVED

Education is paramount to freedom and prosperity; it is critical to understand how curricula are entering our schools

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INTRODUCTION

In the United States, as of 2020, there were an estimated 56.4 million students enrolled in public and private K-12 schools ([U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences. National Center for Education Statistics n.d.](#)). On average, these students spend nearly 7 hours a day for 180 days totaling 1,260 hours in the classroom each year ([Schools and Staffing Survey \(SASS\), n.d.](#)). Teachers spend considerable time with students to shape their learning outcomes, personalities, and identities. In recent months, there has been an increased debate regarding what is or is not acceptable to include in public school curriculum plans. A rapid allocation of funds due to COVID-19 and heightened tensions over the teaching of racial and social issues have made curriculum content a top debate among politicians, parents, students, and teachers alike.

In a [recent poll](#) from Parents Defending Education, 80 percent of people opposed the use of classrooms to promote political activism. When asked, the majority of Americans did not want students being taught that America is structurally racist, told that there is no such thing as biological sex, taught that white students are privileged, and/or taught that America was founded on racism. [A survey](#) commissioned by the Heritage Foundation of parents with K-12 students found that 75 percent of them did not believe schools should teach that “the founding ideals of liberty and equality were false when they were written, and America’s history must be reframed” ([Burke et al., 2021](#)). Despite the opposition to these teachings, the political rise of “wokeness” and ideas such as Critical Race Theory (CRT), the 1619 Project, and action civics have brought these concepts into thousands of schools across the country ([Burke et al., n.d.-a](#)).

CRT argues that racism and white supremacy are the foundations of the American legal system and American society ([Britannica, n.d.-b](#)). *The New York Times’s* 1619 Project is radical political advocacy framed as “journalism” with the goals of reframing American history and challenging national memory ([Adams, 2020](#)). The 1619 Project makes many [historically](#)

[inaccurate](#) claims. While top historians in the country have disputed the accuracy of the 1619 project, yet it has still been turned into a curriculum and disseminated in more than 4,500 schools across the country ([Burke et al., 2021](#); [Bynum et al., 2019](#)). Thousands of other schools continue to utilize such theories and projects that bring politics directly into the classroom. From an elementary [school in Philadelphia](#) forcing their fifth-grade students to simulate a black power rally to the [Oregon Department of Education](#) adopting CRT in mathematics to [Rockville Center High School](#) in New York giving out a homework assignment that “demonized” the police, these are just a few of the many examples we see across the Nation. While the current debate is centered around the teachings of these divisive concepts, more attention should be paid to the low scores K-12 students are obtaining in core competency areas like reading, math, and civics education.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is known as the “Nations Report Card.” NAEP is a nationally standardized assessment of student achievement. The test is administered biannually to fourth and eighth-grade students nationwide to measure math and reading proficiency. The scores are reported as a percentage of students who scored as advanced, proficient, and basic. A recent study analyzed the results of eighth-grade achievement in math and reading from 2003-2017. The [study](#) found no gains in the achievement scores of eighth-grade students in reading and math over the 14-year time frame. The analysis also noted that in 36 states and the District of Columbia, one-third of the low income eighth graders scored below basic in reading. The dismal results for math revealed that more than one-half of low-income eighth-grade students in nine states scored below basic. As states are seeking ways to improve math and reading student outcomes, civics education is also at the forefront for much-needed reforms. [Recent studies](#) suggest only 36 percent of Americans would be able to pass a United States Citizenship test, 57 percent do not know how many justices serve on the supreme court. A 2019 Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation [survey](#) found that only 15 percent of American adults could correctly note the year the United States Constitution was written and only 25 percent knew how many amendments there are to the United States Constitution. Twenty- five percent did not know that freedom of speech was guaranteed under the First Amendment (Lewer, 2019). Students in the United States are falling behind in critical academic areas, yet the debate on curriculum continues to be focused on racial and social issues. Understanding what curriculum is and who determines what curriculum is used will enable us to better understand how concepts make their way into U.S. schools.

THE ABC’S OF CURRICULUM

Curriculum is defined as *the courses offered by a school* ([Merriam-Webster, n.d.](#)). In PreK and K-12, the term curriculum is commonly used to refer to all the academic lessons and content taught within a classroom. The curriculum, as defined above, includes components that all interrelate to the expected learning outcomes of students. Students have different types of learning styles, and some teachers seek lesson plans to teach a subject that meets the needs of their students. The curriculum defines what teachers and learners need to know and the lesson plans carry out that objective. Curriculum and instructional materials are used

to present the content of a given subject in a logical order for each grade level, and they are most often produced and distributed by textbook publishers ([Navigating the New Curriculum Landscape](#)). To ease the procurement process and streamline education curriculum, state education boards can select textbooks to be adopted by districts on a pre-approved list. The school districts can always order and select their own curriculum and materials, but many find it easier to obtain books from a state pre-approved list.

School districts evaluate, develop, and adopt the curriculum and textbooks to keep their educational materials and instruction updated. Every state has control over what is taught in its schools and over the requirements that a student must meet, and each state, or a political subdivision of the state, is also responsible for the funding of schools. States regulate curricula at public schools, and they often use high school graduation requirements to regulate school curricula by requiring a certain number of courses in specific subjects. Each state has different requirements for graduating high school students ([National Center for Education Statistics, 2021](#)). They determine the number of years of compulsory education, which refers to the minimum and maximum age required for a student to be enrolled in and attending public school or some equivalent education program defined by the law. In most states, education is compulsory from ages 5 or 6 to 16, but in some states, teens have to stay in school until age 18 ([Education Commission of the States, 2020](#)).

The United States Constitution does not mention education; public education is an attribute of the states. The Founding Fathers left education provisions to the states ([Constitutional Requirements Governing American Education, n.d.](#)). State constitutions include legislative provisions for a system of public schools and usually require a “general, uniform, or efficient” system ([Hunter, n.d.](#)). State legislative enactment delegates that power and authority over to local school boards to develop policies, rules, regulations, school finance, staffing, curriculum, and overall school operations within the district boundaries. Every state except for the District of Columbia and Hawaii has statutory provisions outlining the local school board’s authority as Hawaii and the District of Columbia have only one single public school district ([Education Commission of the States, 2020](#)).

In some states, local school boards, which primarily consist of elected members, have the final approval or denial of a selected curriculum to be used within their schools. According to [Boser, Chingos & Straus, 2015](#), 19 states have a state-level adoption process for instructional materials. The state-level adoption process means that the State Board of Education creates a pre-approved list of recommended books and materials for implementation, but the local school board has the final approval and the ability to choose materials not on the list. The advantages of selecting materials from the pre-approved list include expedited procurement and cost savings as the state enters contracts with book publishers upon their selection. The remaining states allow districts to select their materials with no input from the state board of education, giving the local districts more flexibility to determine what works best for them.

A good curriculum should incorporate parents, teachers, and students to align what teachers do and what students learn ([Curriculum and Expected Learning Outcomes |](#)

[Unesco IIEP Learning Portal, n.d.](#)). Instructional materials are the supports used to teach the curriculum. Textbooks, workbooks, homework, quizzes, and tests are examples of instructional materials supporting student learning. Curriculum alignment is a process that seeks to ensure that the curriculum has coherence and consistency between the intended outcomes through teaching methods, assessments, and learning activities (Özpolat, Esen & Bay, 2020). The [Every Student Succeeds Act](#) (ESSA) requires each school district within a state to develop and implement an accountability model that includes indicators of success, addressing subgroups, provides interim measures of progress, and meets long term-goals. States are mandated to submit accountability plans to receive federal funding. Every state board of education submits the ESSA plan to DoEd for review and approval. At the district level, instructional materials must be aligned to the adopted state academic standards. The approved accountability model within states helps ensure districts meets this requirement. In 45 states, the state board of education adopts learning standards that all students are expected to achieve ([National Association of State Boards of Education, n.d.](#)). Local school districts are expected to choose curriculum and instructional materials that align with the state-adopted education standards. Every 3 years, state boards of education must use data from their accountability system and identify schools in need of improvement (lowest 5 percent). States can intervene and request improvement actions if the district continues to fall behind, and they must set aside 7 percent of Title I funds for school improvement purposes ([Mann, 2017](#)).

Once the standards are set, districts typically select and purchase their resources directly from textbook publishers ([Navigating the New Curriculum Landscape: Background: Curriculum, Open Educational Resources, and Quality, n.d.](#)). The top five textbook publishers' annual revenue for 2020 is Cengage Learning (\$1.32 billion), Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (\$1.03 billion), McGraw-Hill (\$1.58 billion) Pearson (\$4.36 billion), and Scholastic (\$1.49 billion). According to EdWeek Market Brief, 44 percent of school districts across the country make sole source (only from one vendor) purchases and often hire the same providers year after year without issuing a request for proposals, resulting in a lack of competition in the market. In 2019, the U.S. book publishing industry generated \$8.38 billion in revenue in textbook publishing ([Textbook Publishing Revenue in the U.S. 2010-2019 | Statista, n.d.](#)).

[In a 2021 report](#) from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, researchers evaluated the quality of the K-12 civics and history standards adopted by all 50 states and the District of Columbia ([Stern et al.,2021](#)). Researchers reviewed content, rigor, clarity, and organization. They found that only five states (Alabama, California, Massachusetts, Tennessee, and District of Columbia) received “A” ratings, and 20 states were rated “inadequate,” meaning they received “D” or “F” ratings in both subjects. The researchers also noted that Montana, Pennsylvania, and Vermont do not even require high school students to take civics or U.S. history coursework to graduate high school ([Stern, Et.al, 2021](#)). Standards, curricula, and instructional materials all play a vital role in what is taught in the classrooms across the Nation. [A 2017 report](#) from Johns Hopkins University provided research on the effect of curriculum on student outcomes. The authors concluded that a teacher’s or a district’s choice of curriculum significantly affects student learning. According to Steiner, a high-

quality curriculum is built on high expectations, aligned with robust scholarly standards, is academically rigorous, and designed to meet the needs of all learners. The report concluded that a positive impact on student achievement using a high-quality curriculum increased as much as 10 percentile points in reading and 23 percentile points in math ([Steiner, 2017](#)). Furthermore, the authors shared that with such strong evidence, policy decisions should be “deep concern” for policy makers and requires “urgent attention” ([Steiner, 2017](#)).

It is difficult to find accurate data or reviews on curriculum and instruction materials, which is problematic considering the substantial difference a high-quality curriculum can make on learning outcomes and the billions of dollars spent each year on textbooks. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) does not collect any information about the usage of instructional materials in schools across the country. The Institute of Education Sciences’ What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) does publish reviews of existing research on different education programs, products, and policies. According to the WWC reviews of curriculum, many curriculum plans had no research or evidence supporting effectiveness in the classroom. For example, of the 155-math curriculum math available, 108 had no associated studies as to their efficacy ([Institute of Education Sciences, Results: Math, n.d.](#)). Many school districts across the Nation are selecting curriculum that has no evidence that they help improve outcomes for students.

After the state establishes standards, teachers become part of selection committees that help the district adopt instructional materials to use within the classroom. [In a recent survey](#), only 40 percent of teachers reported using a curriculum that is “high-quality and well-aligned to learning standards” ([Voices from the Classroom, 2020](#)). In a 2019 study conducted by the Center on Education Research at Harvard University, math curriculum usage was analyzed in 6,000 schools and over 1,200 teachers across six states. Researchers found that just 25 percent of teachers used the textbook in nearly all their lessons for all essential activities, including in-class exercises, practice problems, and homework problems ([Blazar et al., 2019](#)). When a district does not have a high-quality curriculum, teachers must fill in the educational gaps and develop their own resources and activities to help meet the state standards.

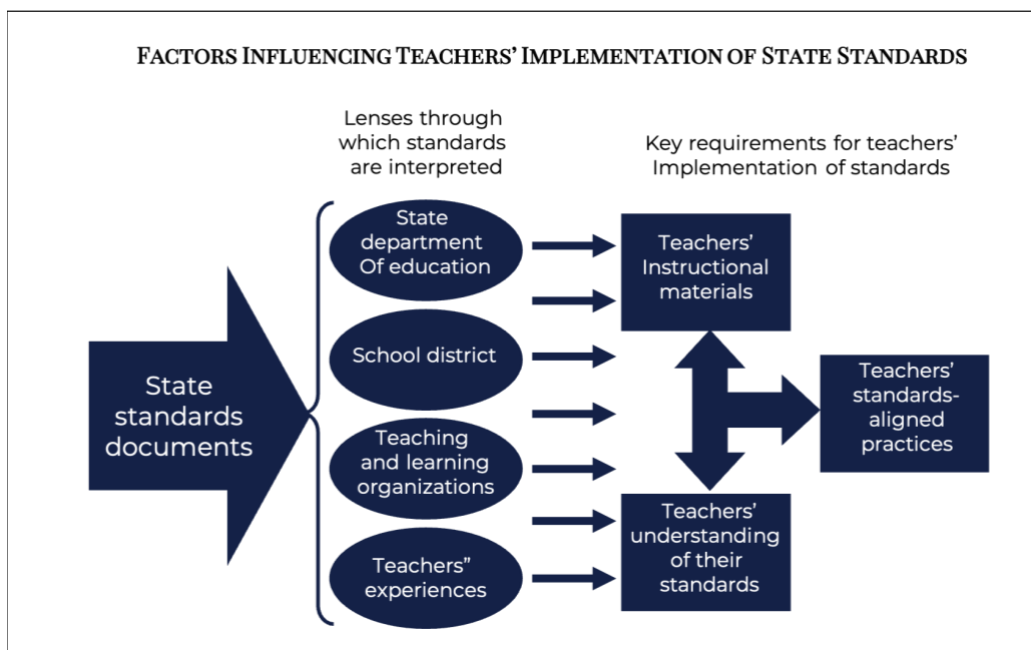
[A 2017 RAND Corporation](#) survey of 1,100 math and English and language arts teachers found that almost all of them rely on materials that they have developed or selected themselves rather than use curriculum supplied by their school district ([Opfer et al., 2017](#)). Additionally, the researchers found that 96 percent of teachers surveyed used Google to find lessons and materials, and 75 percent used Pinterest. When teachers are on their own without support to build their curriculum from Google and Pinterest while also trying to teach, it is difficult to ensure the curriculum’s quality and efficacy so that it meets the needs of all their students. Whether curriculum-setting occurs primarily at the state or district level—or even at the individual school or classroom level, as is the case for charter schools—teachers need to receive adequate support to not diminish the time they have available to dedicate to their true calling of implementing learning in the classroom. Moreover, there needs to be in place a policy regime of proactive transparency and disclosure to ensure that parents can

seamlessly find out the content and educational source materials their kids are exposed to in the classroom, allowing them the opportunity to review such content and raise any potential concerns with the teachers, schools, or state and local elected officials.

State academic standards are the starting point in the curriculum-setting process. They establish the goals and aspirations of what is expected for students to master in the classroom. Standards influence testing materials used, teacher preparation courses, and professional development training for teachers. In a recent review of K-12 history and civics standards, researchers found that only five states were rated an “A” in both subjects (Stern et.al., 2021). When curriculum materials are not developed to improve student education outcomes learning in the classroom may suffer. For example, the Pulitzer Center formed a partnership with *The New York Times* to distribute lesson plans from the 1619 Project built around essays written as a self-described “work of journalism” rather than historical fact (Adams, 2020). This “curriculum” has made its way into over 4,500 schools across the Nation, with nothing to suggest that it is oriented around or attaining any improvement of academic achievement (Burke et al., 2021). In fact, numerous historians have disputed the false, misleading, and purely political claims the 1619 Project makes (Bynum et al., 2019). There are better methods for curriculum selection and much-needed reforms in history and civics academic standard setting. Our students deserve the best of the public school system, and our parents deserve transparency on the origin of lesson plans.

Figure 1 below illustrates the relationship between state standards and what materials teachers use in the classroom. State standards establish what students need to learn, but they do not tell the teacher how to teach. Schools and teachers decide how to help their students reach the standards; however, there are few studies available that measure how teachers implement the standards adopted by states.

Figure 1: Relationship with state standards and what teachers use in the classroom



EDUCATION GOVERNANCE

To understand the role of the adoption of materials within the structure of the public education system, it is important to understand the basic components of the federal laws that govern public schools. President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) into law in 1965 as part of the War on Poverty. For the first time in U.S. history, it called for schools to close gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged children giving every child an equal start regardless of family income and zip code ([Economic Policy Institute, 2017](#)). Fifty-six years after President Johnson signed ESEA into law, the outcomes of schools failing our children are substantial. Large percentages of low-income students are still unprepared for college or the workplace as provided by the previously mentioned NAEP scores. Additionally, the results of eighth-grade achievement in math and reading from 2003-2017 indicated no gains in achievement scores in reading and math over the 14-year time frame. The analysis also noted that in 36 states and the District of Columbia, one-third of low-income eighth graders scored below basic in reading. The dismal results for math revealed that more than one-half of low-income eighth-grade students in nine states scored below basic.

In 1980, Congress established the United States Department of Education (DoEd) as a Cabinet-level agency. DoED manages elementary and secondary programs serving nearly 18,000 school districts and 98,000 schools across America. DoED also oversees the universities and colleges that serve approximately 12 million postsecondary students ([Federal Role in Education, n.d.](#)). Currently, states operate under ESSA. Under ESSA, every state must create an education plan and academic standards for its schools with the federal framework provided by DoEd. In addition to the ESSA plans, states are currently submitting American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ARP ESSER) plans. States are required to submit plans and describe how the funds will be used to support schools, students, and educators. ([Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015](#)).

Although education is deemed a state responsibility, not federal, over the past 6 decades, the federal government has become very involved in various education reform efforts. The American Rescue Plan (ARP) is a current example of the federal government's increased involvement in state education plans. The ARP requires school districts to reserve 20 percent of funds for "evidence-based" interventions that "respond to students' academic, social, and emotional needs," including antiracist therapy and disrupting whiteness ([Eden, 2021](#)). This heavy-handed control comes even as the federal government's spending is just 7.7 percent of all K-12 spending, with state and local taxpayers covering 92.3 percent for K-12 education spending ([Hanson, 2021](#)). It is also estimated that less than 10 percent of K-12 education is paid for by federal funds. The Government Accountability Office estimates that federal regulations cause more than 40 percent of the administrative burden experienced by state education agencies ([Amselem et al., 2020](#)). It is alarming that the federal government leverages its relatively modest 7.7 percent provision of funding for K-12 education to exert such a heavy regulatory burden on states to conform to federal requirements.

COMMON CORE: A FAILED EXPERIMENT ON STANDARDS-BASED REFORM

Student achievement in the United States has been falling behind other countries for many decades ([Pew Research, 2017](#)). The National Governor’s Association published a report in 2008 suggesting states should adopt a common core of internationally benchmarked education standards ([Ensuring U.S. Students Receive a World-Class Education, 2008](#)). The standards, later named Common Core State Standards (CCSS), were only created for math and English Language Arts (ELA) and were released in 2010 (Ensuring U.S. Students Receive a World-Class Education, 2008). Following the introduction of Common Core State Standards (CCSS), the DoEd during the Obama Administration announced the Race to the Top funding opportunity program, which was a \$4.34 billion grant competition that invited states to compete for the funds. The announcement required states to commit to adopting the CCSS to be eligible for the funding. Forty-two states committed, but under the federally imposed definition of “commitment,” not a single state legislature approved of it. The initial CCSS did not include social studies, science, health, or the arts.

Since the creation of CCSS, most states aligned their math and ELA education standards with CCSS. [A recent study](#) estimates the effects of CCSS adoption on student achievement in the other areas of science and social studies. They found that CCSS decreased student achievement in these non-CCSS subject areas. The study found that CCSS harmed student achievement in non-targeted subjects of science and social studies. They discovered that underprivileged students were negatively affected the most by the implementation of CCSS. The authors explain that these findings imply that CCSS increased racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic student achievement gaps in science and social studies ([Aroid and Shakeel, 2021](#)). Since teachers were so focused on math and ELA, they likely neglected other subject areas that contributed to the adverse outcomes of students most in need. Overall, the researchers concluded that CCSS caused a reduction of focus on science, social studies, and the arts have a negative impact on student learning outcomes. As stated above, student outcomes are declining for our most vulnerable students. CCSS has failed, and it is critical to allow states the freedom to choose curricula consistent with effective teaching research.

THE KEY PLAYERS IN CURRICULUM

State Boards of Education

State Boards of Education (SBE) are different in every state and have diverse policy authorities. Some are created by the state constitution and others by statute. Some members are elected, and some are appointed. In 45 states, the state board adopts learning standards that all students are expected to achieve. In 31 states, state boards have primary authority over state summative assessments. In addition, most SBEs have the following authority:

- establish high school graduation requirements;
- determine qualifications for professional education personnel;
- establish state accountability and assessment programs; and

- establish standards for accreditation of local school districts and preparation programs for teachers and administrators.

Regardless of their level of authority, all boards and board members have three significant powers:

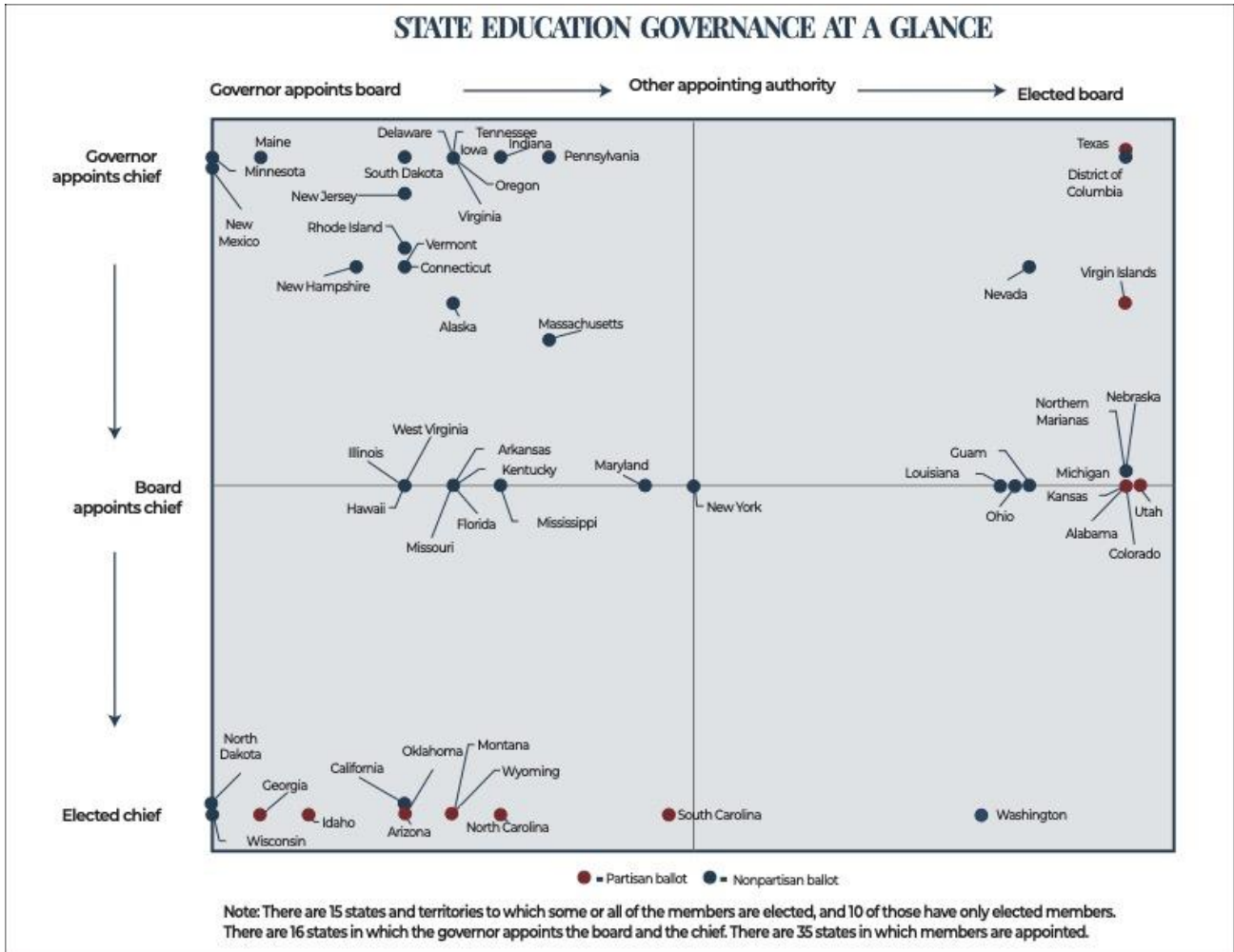
1. Authority to **adopt and revise policies** that promote educational excellence and equity.
2. **Convene** experts and stakeholders to serve as a bridge between policymakers and citizens.
3. Authority **to raise questions** as the citizens' voice in education.

Some state boards of education review curriculum and provide an approved list to school districts to select from that are aligned to the state standards. Districts are not mandated to use these approved curriculums but can ease the process of adoption if it has already been selected and deemed high-quality by the state board.

According to an Education Commission of the States [report](#), every state has constitutional language that details the authority and duties of state legislatures in education ([Education Commission of the States, 2020](#)). Forty states give the state legislature some role in appointing or confirming the Chief State School Officer or State Board of Education Members ([50-State Comparison: K-12 Governance - Education Commission of the States, n.d.](#)). From 2020-2021, there were 71 bills enacted on K-12 governance across the country ([State Education Policy Tracking - Education Commission of the States, n.d.](#)). Most State Boards of Education have the authority to: establish high school graduation requirements, determine qualifications for teachers, establish accountability and assessment models, and establish standards for accreditation of local school boards and teacher prep programs.

Figure 2: State Board of Education Members

Source: ([National Association of State Boards of Education, 2021](#))



Local School District Boards

Local school boards establish and maintain a basic organizational structure for the local school system. They approve curriculum, meet federal and state mandates for public schools, appoint superintendents, adopt budgets, and help to maintain educational excellence ([Alexander, S. Kern and Alexander, David, 2001](#)). There are roughly 14,000 school boards across the country and about 100,000 school board members, and 95 percent of the school board members are elected to their positions ([What Every Parent Should Know about Their School Board | Parenting, n.d.](#)). They represent the largest group of elected officials in the country. School board members set a district’s priorities for spending. They resolve legal and disciplinary issues, acquire land, and can even initiate eminent domain proceedings. School board members wield a great deal of power as elected officials.

Yet despite this, school board elections receive the least amount of attention and have the lowest voter turnout. According to Ballotpedia, from 2018 to 2020, there were elections for 2,803 school board seats in 960 school districts across the United States. They found that

between 35 percent and 40 percent of those school board elections were unopposed each year and that incumbents won between 57 percent and 61 percent of seats. Additionally, between 82 percent and 89 percent of incumbents who sought re-election won each year ([School board elections, 2021 - Ballotpedia](#)). [In 2019](#), one Virginia district had three candidates run unopposed for re-election to their respective seats ([The Public's Voice, 2020](#)). That same year in Los Angeles County, only 8.7 percent of eligible voters participated in the local school board election. And in a 2017 race in Iowa, just 498 voters—or 10 percent of registered voters—decided the race for school board members in one district. Authors of a 2021 study analyzed school board elections across the United States and found that most voters who cast ballots in school board elections do not have children enrolled in those local schools ([Kogan et al., 2021](#)).

The school board sets the standard for achievement in the school district, incorporating the community's view of what students should know and accomplish at each grade level. School boards are a prime example of local control; however, many districts have trouble finding candidates and have low voter turnout ([National School Board Association, 2019](#)). The authority to determine the K-12 curriculum rests with the district school boards. Teachers, as employees, are required to carry out that curriculum and abide by any restrictions and do not have the freedom to use teaching materials that are contrary to school policy ([Underwood, 2019](#)).

Local school district boards do not report to the state board of education. They only are accountable to the voters in their local jurisdiction. A critical role of the local school board is to approve the curriculum. School districts have adoption committees made of teachers and administrators. This committee creates the selection criteria, a community staff engagement plan, and a proposed timeline for adopting the curriculum and supporting materials. After the selection process, the committee submits their final selection to the District Superintendent, who presents it to the board for approval. Typically, board members only learn of the new curriculum to be considered for their approval and the reasoning behind it after the district has already selected the curriculum. While district leaders and educators should lead decisions about instructional materials, school boards should be involved in the conversation from the beginning rather than waiting until the end of the process ([Rawding, 2021](#)). Parents and members of the public should have access to the board's goals, curriculum materials, and student achievement.

State legislatures across the country are making it clear that parents should have full knowledge of academic content being taught in their children's classrooms. In Arizona, for example, state law includes language that the "parent of a student in a public educational institution has the right to review learning materials and activities in advance." Additionally, the law requires schools to make one copy of all instructional materials (all books and supplemental materials) being used by a school district. In Texas, parents are entitled to review all teaching materials, instructional materials, and other teaching aids used in the classroom. Through the use of technology, these materials should be easily accessible for parents ([Goldwater Institute, 2020](#)).

Parents

The Heritage Foundation collaborated with Braun Research to survey parents and school board members regarding K-12 policy across the United States. The [2020 survey results reveal](#) that most parents believe that character and virtue should be cornerstones of education in America. Eighty-three percent of parents and 89 percent of school board members want schools to instill character and virtue in children ([Burke et al., 2021](#)). Parents have various options to be part of a district's decisions regarding the choice of the curriculum, including attending monthly board meetings and reviewing board activities. These public meetings are required to be announced in advance and post to board activities. School boards are also required to make public their textbook adoption procedures. Parents can request that public school district boards be transparent about curricula, textbooks, and materials used in the classroom. Additionally, attending the National and local [Parent Teacher Association \(PTA\)](#) helps keep parents informed of school and state-based concerns. It allows parents to speak on curriculum, discipline, school funding, and textbooks. Networking with other parents helps build a network for communication.

Teachers and Principals

Universities and colleges across the United States play a critical role in the development of effective teachers ([Ball and Forzani, 2011](#)). Teachers must have strong content knowledge and opportunity for ongoing professional development. Teacher prep programs across the United States have varying requirements to help future teachers. Some teacher prep programs require up to 600 hours of on site training, other teacher prep programs require no clinical training hours. States set the criteria that teachers must satisfy to earn a teaching license (Partelow, L. & Konoske-Graf, 2017). Teacher's effectiveness is a pivotal factor for schools in improving student achievement. The role of teachers is instrumental to the success or failure of a curriculum. Improving teacher quality is one of the most powerful ways to create better schools. Students can gain up to a full year of academic growth in a classroom with an effective teacher. Teachers are evaluated at the end of every year for their performance for that year. Teachers report directly to their principal or assistant principal, and they discuss the yearly evaluation and areas for improvement. Teachers can also be held accountable for students' scores on standardized tests. In the fall of 2021, there will be almost 3.2 million full-time teachers, according to [federal projections](#). Additionally, there are 90,850 public school principals in the U.S. according to 2017-18 numbers from [NCES](#). According to [NCES data from 2017-18](#), 69.4 percent of teachers are members of a union. As of June 2019, the National Education Association (NEA) had [about 2.29 million full-time-equivalent members who are active educators or retirees](#). As of June 2019, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) had [almost 1.7 million members](#).

Teachers Unions

The two primary teachers' unions, AFT and the NEA, are amongst the largest labor unions in the United States. The NEA is America's largest labor union representing over [3 million people](#), principally teachers. With affiliates in every state across 14,000 communities, NEA represents teachers, education support professionals, retired teachers, education faculty and

staff, substitute teachers, and administrators. Teacher unions influence instruction and other educational practices of interest in four general ways:(1) electoral politics and lobbying, (2) collective bargaining, (3) reform initiatives focused on their members, and (4) dissemination of information about best practices in teaching ([Teacher Unions - Influence On Instruction And Other Educational Practices - Teachers, National, School, and Reform, n.d](#)).

Currently, there is guidance and information about CRT and a call to action to stand up against legislation to block CRT and other divisive concepts on the NEA website. As stated on the [NEA website](#):

Despite a legislative push to ban critical race theory, educators are committed to helping students examine the systems in which we all work and live. The Zinn Education Project, which promotes and supports the teaching of people's history in classrooms across the country, and in collaboration with Black Lives Matter at School, are inviting educators (families, students, and other allies, too!) to raise public awareness about the danger of the anti-history education GOP bills in gatherings nationwide on Saturday, June 12, 2021.

From 1990 through February 2019, the NEA contributed nearly \$143.5 million to federal candidates and committees, 97 percent of which supported Democrats. The NEA is also deeply entangled in state and local politics and contributes to left-of-center nonprofit organizations ([National Education Association \(NEA\) - InfluenceWatch](#)). At the national and state levels, teachers' unions have become a powerful force, influencing legislation and elections. Teachers' unions have a tremendous influence on political organizations. 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. In 2016, the AFT and [NEA collectively gave \\$64 million](#) in political contributions. In a [study conducted by Michigan State University](#), researchers 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 yielding higher salaries. They also found that students in unionized districts have higher dropout rates and lower math and reading proficiency rates. Unions do not appear to help and might hinder student test scores and graduation rates ([Cowen & O.Strunk, 2015](#)).

Figure 3 below provides data on NEA donations for political candidates during the 2019-2020 election cycle and released by the Federal Election Commission. As is demonstrated, teachers' unions give sizeable donations to candidates all across the country while simultaneously weighing in on racial and social issues in the curriculum.

Top 20 Recipients

Rank	Candidate	Office	Amount
1	Biden, Joe (D)		\$260,861
2	Sanders, Bernie (I-VT)	Senate	\$61,670
3	Ossoff, Jon (D-GA)	Senate	\$45,287
4	Warren, Elizabeth (D-MA)	Senate	\$41,964
5	Harrison, Jaime (D-SC)		\$38,660
6	Warnock, Raphael (D-GA)	Senate	\$38,516
7	Peters, Gary (D-MI)	Senate	\$38,413
8	Kelly, Mark (D-AZ)	Senate	\$33,717
9	Bullock, Steve (D-MT)		\$33,132
10	Smith, Christy (D-CA)		\$33,079
11	Gideon, Sara (D-ME)		\$29,740
12	Cunningham, Cal (D-NC)		\$29,193
13	Smith, Tina (D-MN)	Senate	\$28,729
14	Hoadley, Jon (D-MI)		\$27,992
15	Spanberger, Abigail (D-VA)	House	\$27,461
16	Galvin, Alyse (I-AK)		\$25,280
17	Jayapal, Pramila (D-WA)	House	\$25,175
18	Slotkin, Elissa (D-MI)	House	\$24,541
19	Demings, Val (D-FL)	House	\$24,150
20	Markey, Ed (D-MA)	Senate	\$23,901

Figure 2 <https://www.opensecrets.org/industries/recips.php?ind=I1300&cycle=2020&recipdetail=A&sortorder=U>

CONCLUSION

The purpose of the American public school system is to educate children. Knowledge and education are considered significant factors contributing to healthy families, economic growth and prosperity, and the reduction of poverty. The best curriculum is rigorous, focused on improving academic achievement, and includes effective tools to help teachers serve all children. Adopting a high-quality curriculum leads to student success, making it paramount that there is accountability and transparency in the curriculum approval process. As previously presented, the curriculum starts with creating and adopting state academic

standards. School districts select curriculum materials, textbooks, and instructional items to attain the educational outcomes established by these state-adopted standards. The local school board has the final authority to approve or disapprove of the recommended curriculum. Ideally, upon approval, teachers move forward and begin using a curriculum that is aligned and evidence-based, ultimately helping students learn. Politicizing K-12 education is very concerning. When political activism and the teaching of “wokeism” take priority over a high-quality, factually accurate curriculum, it does a disservice to our Nation’s students. Rather than politicizing education, steps need to be taken to hold the State Board of Education, local school board officials, principals, and teachers accountable in their choice of curriculum, supplemental materials, and lesson plans.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The U.S. Constitution leaves education to the states and localities and denies the federal government any authority to impose national curriculum standards. A [recent survey](#) suggests that an overwhelming majority of Americans (80 percent) are opposed to using classrooms to promote political activism to students. The authority to approve curriculum in public schools lies squarely on the shoulders of states and local school boards. Parents need to be involved early in the approval process, and we need increased transparency on what qualifies as appropriate content for curriculum and lesson plans. Today’s contentious debates about classroom use for political activism have reinvigorated the need for increased parental and citizen involvement in the curriculum approval process. The overwhelming majority of American’s do not want our education system to be used as political ploys. Yet, the overwhelming majority of Americans are not exercising their right to vote in school board elections or actively engaged in school board meetings.

There are many ways that schools can keep parents informed through improved transparency, accountability for teachers to adhere to the approved curriculum, and action steps for parents to be involved in the process at the local school district level.

1. Transparency:

Information is power in public schools. Public school officials need to make the PreK-12 curriculum materials available to all families, and families need to review the material. Parents should be able to view the course syllabus, books, articles, homework, online assignments, and in-class assignments. A [Utah Senate Bill 1357](#) includes the following language:

Each school that is operated by a school district and each charter school shall allow parents and guardians on written request advance approval to access instructional materials that are currently used or being considered for use by the school or charter school by making at least one copy of the instructional materials available for review for the entire school year.

Academic transparency can also be developed by providing curriculum materials online for parents. Some universities across the United States post detailed course syllabi for public access. Mississippi State University, for example, posts syllabi, textbook, curriculum framework, and learning objectives for a teacher prep course on the teaching of social studies found here: [COURSE SYLLABUS \(msstate.edu\)](https://www.msstate.edu/collegeofeducation/graduate/teacher-preparation/courses/education-50100-50101-50102-50103-50104-50105-50106-50107-50108-50109-50110-50111-50112-50113-50114-50115-50116-50117-50118-50119-50120-50121-50122-50123-50124-50125-50126-50127-50128-50129-50130-50131-50132-50133-50134-50135-50136-50137-50138-50139-50140-50141-50142-50143-50144-50145-50146-50147-50148-50149-50150-50151-50152-50153-50154-50155-50156-50157-50158-50159-50160-50161-50162-50163-50164-50165-50166-50167-50168-50169-50170-50171-50172-50173-50174-50175-50176-50177-50178-50179-50180-50181-50182-50183-50184-50185-50186-50187-50188-50189-50190-50191-50192-50193-50194-50195-50196-50197-50198-50199-50200-50201-50202-50203-50204-50205-50206-50207-50208-50209-50210-50211-50212-50213-50214-50215-50216-50217-50218-50219-50220-50221-50222-50223-50224-50225-50226-50227-50228-50229-50230-50231-50232-50233-50234-50235-50236-50237-50238-50239-50240-50241-50242-50243-50244-50245-50246-50247-50248-50249-50250-50251-50252-50253-50254-50255-50256-50257-50258-50259-50260-50261-50262-50263-50264-50265-50266-50267-50268-50269-50270-50271-50272-50273-50274-50275-50276-50277-50278-50279-50280-50281-50282-50283-50284-50285-50286-50287-50288-50289-50290-50291-50292-50293-50294-50295-50296-50297-50298-50299-50300-50301-50302-50303-50304-50305-50306-50307-50308-50309-50310-50311-50312-50313-50314-50315-50316-50317-50318-50319-50320-50321-50322-50323-50324-50325-50326-50327-50328-50329-50330-50331-50332-50333-50334-50335-50336-50337-50338-50339-50340-50341-50342-50343-50344-50345-50346-50347-50348-50349-50350-50351-50352-50353-50354-50355-50356-50357-50358-50359-50360-50361-50362-50363-50364-50365-50366-50367-50368-50369-50370-50371-50372-50373-50374-50375-50376-50377-50378-50379-50380-50381-50382-50383-50384-50385-50386-50387-50388-50389-50390-50391-50392-50393-50394-50395-50396-50397-50398-50399-50400-50401-50402-50403-50404-50405-50406-50407-50408-50409-50410-50411-50412-50413-50414-50415-50416-50417-50418-50419-50420-50421-50422-50423-50424-50425-50426-50427-50428-50429-50430-50431-50432-50433-50434-50435-50436-50437-50438-50439-50440-50441-50442-50443-50444-50445-50446-50447-50448-50449-50450-50451-50452-50453-50454-50455-50456-50457-50458-50459-50460-50461-50462-50463-50464-50465-50466-50467-50468-50469-50470-50471-50472-50473-50474-50475-50476-50477-50478-50479-50480-50481-50482-50483-50484-50485-50486-50487-50488-50489-50490-50491-50492-50493-50494-50495-50496-50497-50498-50499-50500-50501-50502-50503-50504-50505-50506-50507-50508-50509-50510-50511-50512-50513-50514-50515-50516-50517-50518-50519-50520-50521-50522-50523-50524-50525-50526-50527-50528-50529-50530-50531-50532-50533-50534-50535-50536-50537-50538-50539-50540-50541-50542-50543-50544-50545-50546-50547-50548-50549-50550-50551-50552-50553-50554-50555-50556-50557-50558-50559-50560-50561-50562-50563-50564-50565-50566-50567-50568-50569-50570-50571-50572-50573-50574-50575-50576-50577-50578-50579-50580-50581-50582-50583-50584-50585-50586-50587-50588-50589-50590-50591-50592-50593-50594-50595-50596-50597-50598-50599-50600-50601-50602-50603-50604-50605-50606-50607-50608-50609-50610-50611-50612-50613-50614-50615-50616-50617-50618-50619-50620-50621-50622-50623-50624-50625-50626-50627-50628-50629-50630-50631-50632-50633-50634-50635-50636-50637-50638-50639-50640-50641-50642-50643-50644-50645-50646-50647-50648-50649-50650-50651-50652-50653-50654-50655-50656-50657-50658-50659-50660-50661-50662-50663-50664-50665-50666-50667-50668-50669-50670-50671-50672-50673-50674-50675-50676-50677-50678-50679-50680-50681-50682-50683-50684-50685-50686-50687-50688-50689-50690-50691-50692-50693-50694-50695-50696-50697-50698-50699-50700-50701-50702-50703-50704-50705-50706-50707-50708-50709-50710-50711-50712-50713-50714-50715-50716-50717-50718-50719-50720-50721-50722-50723-50724-50725-50726-50727-50728-50729-50730-50731-50732-50733-50734-50735-50736-50737-50738-50739-50740-50741-50742-50743-50744-50745-50746-50747-50748-50749-50750-50751-50752-50753-50754-50755-50756-50757-50758-50759-50760-50761-50762-50763-50764-50765-50766-50767-50768-50769-50770-50771-50772-50773-50774-50775-50776-50777-50778-50779-50780-50781-50782-50783-50784-50785-50786-50787-50788-50789-50790-50791-50792-50793-50794-50795-50796-50797-50798-50799-50800-50801-50802-50803-50804-50805-50806-50807-50808-50809-50810-50811-50812-50813-50814-50815-50816-50817-50818-50819-50820-50821-50822-50823-50824-50825-50826-50827-50828-50829-50830-50831-50832-50833-50834-50835-50836-50837-50838-50839-50840-50841-50842-50843-50844-50845-50846-50847-50848-50849-50850-50851-50852-50853-50854-50855-50856-50857-50858-50859-50860-50861-50862-50863-50864-50865-50866-50867-50868-50869-50870-50871-50872-50873-50874-50875-50876-50877-50878-50879-50880-50881-50882-50883-50884-50885-50886-50887-50888-50889-50890-50891-50892-50893-50894-50895-50896-50897-50898-50899-50900-50901-50902-50903-50904-50905-50906-50907-50908-50909-50910-50911-50912-50913-50914-50915-50916-50917-50918-50919-50920-50921-50922-50923-50924-50925-50926-50927-50928-50929-50930-50931-50932-50933-50934-50935-50936-50937-50938-50939-50940-50941-50942-50943-50944-50945-50946-50947-50948-50949-50950-50951-50952-50953-50954-50955-50956-50957-50958-50959-50960-50961-50962-50963-50964-50965-50966-50967-50968-50969-50970-50971-50972-50973-50974-50975-50976-50977-50978-50979-50980-50981-50982-50983-50984-50985-50986-50987-50988-50989-50990-50991-50992-50993-50994-50995-50996-50997-50998-50999-51000). Local school districts can easily follow this same precedent. Online reporting and transparency of instructional materials would be of great value for parents and families.

2. Accountability:

Research on teaching indicates that teachers are powerful contributors to student achievement. Current teacher evaluation systems are usually a multiphase process of classroom observations by principals and education administrators. Presently, some include measures of student achievement such as standardized test scores or learning objectives ([Robinson, 2021](#)). Measuring teacher effectiveness is very challenging, and every state does it differently. This makes it difficult to understand how a teacher's choice of instructional materials impacts their effectiveness. One organization that seeks to certify teacher quality is the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. This board has established a set of standards on effective teaching ([NBTS, 2021](#)) to help define best practices in teaching.

Much like physician's board standards, more than 125,000 teachers in all 50 states and the District of Columbia have achieved the level of National Board-Certified Teacher (NBCT). With almost 3.2 million full-time teachers, this means that less than 4 percent of public-school teachers have achieved the level of board-certified. To become a National Board-Certified teacher, teachers are evaluated against a set of standards set by the board. The certification process requires that teachers demonstrate standards-based evidence of the positive effect they have on student learning. Raising the bar for teacher quality through the National Board Certified Teacher program increases the profession's accountability. Beyond this, parents can hold teachers accountable by closely reviewing their students' lesson plans and asking questions when concerns arise.

3. Next Steps: Ways Parents Can Get Involved

[Studies show](#) that children whose parents are actively involved in their education are more likely to demonstrate higher achievement in school. The list below includes 10 productive ways parents can become actively involved in K-12 education:

1. Engage with local school boards by attending meetings throughout the year. All meeting schedules should be publicly available.
2. Meet with local school board members to discuss agenda items or concerns.
3. Request access to curriculum plans and instructional materials.
4. Vote in school board elections.
5. Run as a candidate for your local school board.

6. Request to participate in the selection and approval of academic standards with the State Board of Education.
7. Speak out against the use of curricula like the 1619 Project, action civics, and CRT that are political rather than evidence-based, high-quality curriculum.
8. Direct local school board to use civics and history materials that teach honestly about informed citizenship and civics education.
9. Visit your child's school and request to observe classroom instruction.
10. Attend PTA meetings. This is a great opportunity to interact with other parents and hear from school officials to obtain up-to-date information.

With increased parents and citizen involvement, we can restore our education system and ensure our students are being taught high-quality curriculum rather than politically motivated deceptions about our country and its founding ideals.

Author Biography

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