

Living on the Brink: The State of the American Family

*The National Parents Union
February 2023*

FAMILIES ACROSS THE COUNTRY ARE GRIPPED WITH OVERWHELMING ANXIETY WONDERING IF THE STRESS OF RAISING KIDS IN THE U.S. WILL EASE.

As we assess the State of our Union, we challenge lawmakers across the country to specifically examine the State of the American Family and then meet this moment with bold actions we deserve. In the latest National Parents Union poll from January 2023, 58% of families reported feeling as though the “country was off on the wrong track.”¹

Parents are more fearful than ever about what the future holds for their children. Academic progress is at a 10 year low. Ensuring kids are ready for the career or college of their choice feels more disconnected than ever from their K-12 educational experience. Child mental health concerns have been declared a national emergency. And this year, four million children will fall back into poverty after Congress failed to renew critical poverty reduction programs that families’ relied on. The reality is, raising a family in the United States is harder than it’s been in generations.

Of particular concern are children who make up Generation A – the group of children born between 2010 and 2020. Generation A has the unfortunate collective experience of being the first generation in American history to have experienced the majority of their childhood during a global pandemic. We still don’t know for sure what the long term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic will be on children’s health, but we do know that their learning was disrupted and that could have lasting and devastating impacts on their futures in higher education and the workforce. In fact, this generation of young people, many of whom were already at risk for not being on track academically, are now even further behind. While simultaneously suffering from mental health challenges. **Taken together, these factors could spell big problems for Generation A’s ability to achieve the American Dream and for our country’s ability to compete in a global economy.**

The well-being of children is an important indicator of the health and prosperity of a nation. The White House measures how children are doing using three key indicators: **education**, **economic certainty** and **health**. In this paper, we will explore American childhood through the lens of these three indicators and offer recommendations for improving the state of American childhoods and the experiences of American families.

The National Parents Union (NPU) believes that to create a thriving next generation of engaged, empowered and productive citizens, we must commit to prioritizing kids as we legislate, elect leaders and build new education systems that are reflective of the needs of tomorrow. **We call on policy makers and community leaders to meet this moment with the urgency our children deserve.**

A reminder to all those that lead — children are resilient, and more importantly, they are brilliant. They have the answers to the questions of tomorrow, they have the big new ideas that will propel us into a bright and bold future. **If we don’t make changes to the conditions of today, we risk never fully discovering the potential that exists in Generation A and beyond.**

**The National
Parents Union**

Living on the
Brink: The State
of the American
Family

¹ (2023, January). State of the American Family: Parent Voters Believe the U.S. is on the Wrong Track & Warn of Trouble Ahead for Gen-A Children <https://nationalparentsunion.org/2023/02/06/state-of-the-american-family-parent-voters-believe-the-u-s-is-on-the-wrong-track-warn-of-trouble-ahead-for-gen-a-children/>

PART I: ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND OPPORTUNITY

57 percent of parents anticipate that the quality of education today will be a big problem for Generation A.² Access to an excellent and equitable education is a key indicator of a child’s trajectory and preparedness for their future.³ Unfortunately, due to COVID-19 related learning disruptions and historical education inequities, Generation A will be the least prepared generation in the last 10 years.⁴ The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is also known as “The Nation’s Report Card”. In 2022, 450,000 fourth- and eighth-grade students representing 53 states and territories and 26 urban districts took the NAEP test. The results demonstrated the largest decline in student progress since the assessment started in 1990.

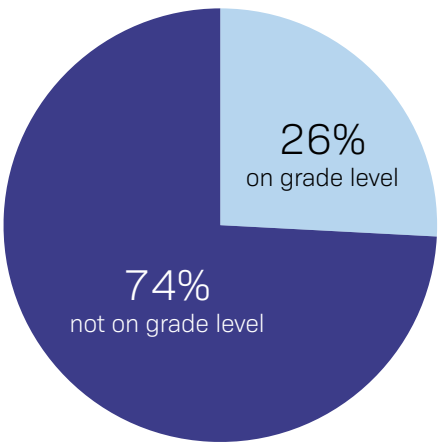
The latest NAEP⁵ results show that just 26% of eighth-grade students met grade level standards for math and just 31% were proficient in reading. Of eighth graders tested on NAEP, 38% scored below “NAEP Basic” in math which is the most rudimentary threshold of mastery classified by the test. In this instance, one-third of eighth graders could not comprehend the text that they read or add dollar amounts using a calculator.

There was not a single state in the country where student achievement advanced on NAEP in 2022. Forty-three jurisdictions (including all 50 states, the District of Columbia and schools operated by the Department of Defense) saw significant drops in fourth-grade performance and remained statistically unchanged in 10 jurisdictions. Fifty-one jurisdictions saw drops in eighth-grade math, while only Utah saw math

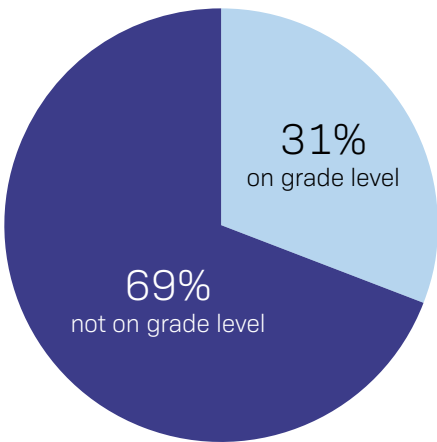
The National
Parents Union

Living on the
Brink: The State
of the American
Family

**75% PERCENT OF 8TH
GRADERS ARE NOT
MEETING GRADE LEVEL
EXPECTIONS IN MATH**



**69% PERCENT OF 8TH
GRADERS ARE NOT
MEETING GRADE LEVEL
EXPECTIONS IN READING**



² (2023, January). State of the American Family: Parent Voters Believe the U.S. is on the Wrong Track & Warn of Trouble Ahead for Gen-A Children <https://nationalparentsunion.org/2023/02/06/state-of-the-american-family-parent-voters-believe-the-u-s-is-on-the-wrong-track-warn-of-trouble-ahead-for-gen-a-children/>

³ Ou, S.R., Yoo, S., & Reynolds, A. J. (2022). Educational Growth Trajectories in Adulthood. National Institute of Health.

⁴ National Center on Education Statistics (n.d.). Results from the NAEP 2022 Mathematics & Reading Assessments at Grades 4 & 8 - Dataset. National Assessment of Education Progress. <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/>

⁵ National Center on Education Statistics (n.d.). Results from the NAEP 2022 Mathematics & Reading Assessments at Grades 4 & 8 - Dataset. National Assessment of Education Progress. <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/>



WHAT WE COULD DO ABOUT IT:

PROVIDING EXTENDED LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES TO ENSURE LEARNING ACCELERATION IS POSSIBLE: Kids need more time to catch up. Policymakers need to step up and make that possible for them. The National Parents Union will support extended learning opportunity legislation that gives parents stipends for after-school learning, access to high-quality tutoring programs, extended school year and summer school for all kids. The reality is that we will need to enhance learning opportunities beyond a traditional seven hour school day. **77% of families support providing funding directly to families of public school students to help them pay for additional educational support for their children (e.g., tutoring outside of school).**⁶

INCREASING ACCESS TO HIGH-QUALITY OPTIONS THAT CAN INNOVATE: Parents deserve access to a variety of school options that provide an environment for students to thrive. Schools should be empowered to be responsive to their community needs at all times, we should be removing barriers that limit students' ability to find a learning environment that is right for them. **41% of families worry that parents do not have enough power to change what school their child attends.**⁷

PATHWAYS TO COLLEGE AND CAREER: Schools must prepare students for their future by facilitating connections with high-wage, high-skill and high-demand employment. This is possible through individualized pathway plans, dual enrollment and career connected programming in our high schools. **73% of families think school should focus more on preparing students for the future.**⁸

INCREASING ACCESS TO HIGH QUALITY CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT: The science of reading and math instruction matters. Instructors need research-based training on how to effectively teach reading and math and develop strong systems to evaluate quality instructional environments. **60% of parents say schools are not doing enough to evaluate learning loss and identify areas students need support.**⁹

⁶ (2023, January). State of the American Family: Parent Voters Believe the U.S. is on the Wrong Track & Warn of Trouble Ahead for Gen-A Children <https://nationalparentsunion.org/2023/02/06/state-of-the-american-family-parent-voters-believe-the-u-s-is-on-the-wrong-track-warn-of-trouble-ahead-for-gen-a-children/>

⁷ (2022, October 18). New parent voters poll: It's the economy, stupid! National Parents Union. <https://nationalparentsunion.org/2022/10/18/new-parent-voters-poll-its-the-economy-stupid/>

⁸ (2023, January). State of the American Family: Parent Voters Believe the U.S. is on the Wrong Track & Warn of Trouble Ahead for Gen-A Children <https://nationalparentsunion.org/2023/02/06/state-of-the-american-family-parent-voters-believe-the-u-s-is-on-the-wrong-track-warn-of-trouble-ahead-for-gen-a-children/>

⁹ (2022, October 18). New parent voters poll: It's the economy, stupid! National Parents Union. <https://nationalparentsunion.org/2022/10/18/new-parent-voters-poll-its-the-economy-stupid/>

PART II: THE ABILITY TO THRIVE THROUGH ECONOMIC CERTAINTY

49 percent of parents believe that it will be harder financially for Generation A to get ahead.¹⁰

Living in a family with income below the poverty line as a child is associated with lower levels of educational attainment, poorer health in adulthood, and lower earnings throughout one's lifetime.¹¹ Over 90% of families who make under \$50,000 a year reported struggling to make ends meet or that they are barely getting by in a National Parents Union Parent Poll.¹²

As the Child Tax Credit and other COVID-19 pandemic related aid expires, we will witness a dramatic increase in the number of families who are living below the federal poverty line. For reference, the federal poverty level is \$13,590 for an individual and \$27,750 for a family of four in 2023.¹³

Families across the country are facing unprecedented challenges. The cost of food has gone up by 12.4% since October of 2021.¹⁴ Moreover, housing costs have risen exponentially. In 2021 housing prices rose by 18.8%, the largest increase in 34 years of data collected.¹⁵ Families are being forced to make hard choices. A recent NPU Parent Poll found that 86% of families were extremely concerned about the rise of everyday costs and 54% were just making ends meet.¹⁶

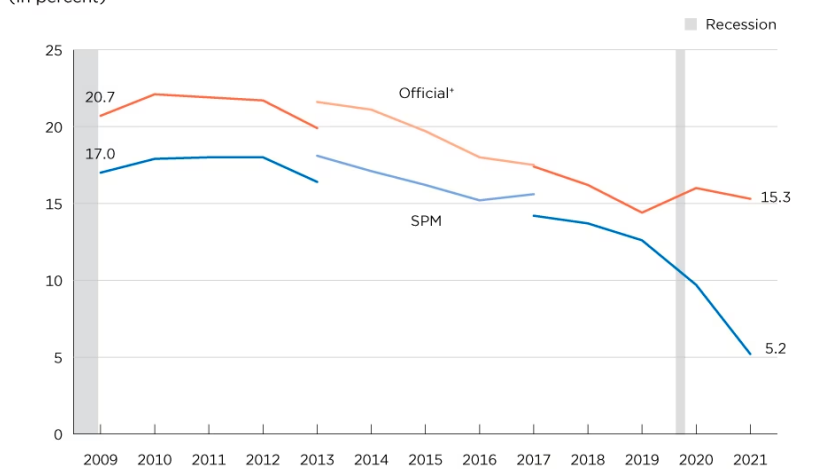
NPU's Parent Poll revealed that Child Tax Credit monthly checks made a difference for hard working families. Of the 68% of parents who received an expanded Child Tax Credit, 86% of parents said it had an impact on their family's financial situation and their bottom line. It is not a surprise the Child Tax Credit Expansion resulted in an unprecedented reduction in households experiencing food insecurity. In 2020, 14.8% of households experienced food insecurity compared to 12.5% in 2021. In other words, as a result of the Child Tax Credit Expansion, 2.5 million fewer children lived in households that experienced food insecurity.¹⁷

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the United States made one of the largest gains in decreasing child poverty in history. The Child Tax Credit was a COVID-19 response

policy where parents received monthly stipends to support their families. The program was responsible for cutting child poverty by 46% in the United States. Congress failed to reinstate this program as part of the 2022 Omnibus bill, which will result in 4.1 million children falling back into poverty.

Notes: Population as of March of the survey year. The official poverty measure (OPM) includes related individuals under the age of 18. The Supplement Poverty Measure (SPM) estimates for 2019 and beyond reflect the implements of revised SPM methodology. [Read more.](#)

Child Poverty Rates Using the Official* and the Supplemental Poverty Measures: 2009-2021
(In percent)



**The National
Parents Union**

Living on the
Brink: The State
of the American
Family



WHAT WE COULD DO ABOUT IT:

SUPPORT FOR CHILD TAX CREDIT AND OTHER REGULAR SUPPLEMENTAL PAYMENT PROGRAMS:

Direct payment programs have resulted in historic declines in childhood poverty. Continuing programs like the Federal Child Tax Credit would immediately lift 2 million children out of poverty. **74% of families support the reinstatement of the expanded Child Tax Credit to give eligible families monthly checks of \$300 per child under age six and \$250 per child age six or older.**¹⁹

SUPPORT FOR EXPANSION OF HUNGER, NUTRITION AND HEALTH INITIATIVES:

Hunger, nutrition and health initiatives like the expansion of SNAP benefits, free and reduced-price lunch programs and Summer EBT alleviate burdens on families. NPU will continue to support the expansion of these programs. **84% of families support providing free lunch at school for all K-12 public school students.**²⁰

¹⁰ (2023, January). State of the American Family: Parent Voters Believe the U.S. is on the Wrong Track & Warn of Trouble Ahead for Gen-A Children <https://nationalparentsunion.org/2023/02/06/state-of-the-american-family-parent-voters-believe-the-u-s-is-on-the-wrong-track-warn-of-trouble-ahead-for-gen-a-children/>

¹¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (n.d.). Social Determinants of Health Literature Summaries. Healthy People 2030. <https://health.gov/healthypeople/priority-areas/social-determinants-health/literature-summaries/poverty>

¹² (2022, September 14). New Poll: Parents Feel Economic Pain Amid a Nation's Struggle for Educational Gain. National Parents Union. <https://nationalparentsunion.org/2022/09/14/new-poll-parents-feel-economic-pain-amid-a-nations-struggle-for-educational-gain/>

¹³ Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (n.d.). U.S. Federal Poverty Guidelines Used to Determine Financial Eligibility for Certain Programs. Poverty Guidelines. <https://aspe.hhs.gov/topics/poverty-economic-mobility/poverty-guidelines>

¹⁴ U.S. Department of Agriculture (n.d.). Summary Findings - Consumer Price Index. Economic Research Services. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-price-outlook/summary-findings/>

¹⁵ Bahney, A. (2022, February 22). Home prices skyrocketed last year. Two regions saw the biggest increases. CNN Business. <https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/22/homes/us-home-prices-case-shiller-december-2021/index.html>

¹⁶ (2022, October 18). New parent voters poll: It's the economy, stupid! National Parents Union. <https://nationalparentsunion.org/2022/10/18/new-parent-voters-poll-its-the-economy-stupid/>

¹⁷ Llobrera, J. (2022, September 9). Food insecurity at a two-decade low for households with kids, signaling successful relief efforts. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/food-insecurity-at-a-two-decade-low-for-households-with-kids-signaling-successful-relief>

¹⁸ (2022, April 12). Tax Season Message: Congress Should Dramatically and Permanently Cut Child Poverty With an Expanded Child Tax Credit. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/tax-season-message-congress-should-dramatically-and-permanently-cut-child-poverty-with-an>

¹⁹ (2023, January). State of the American Family: Parent Voters Believe the U.S. is on the Wrong Track & Warn of Trouble Ahead for Gen-A Children <https://nationalparentsunion.org/2023/02/06/state-of-the-american-family-parent-voters-believe-the-u-s-is-on-the-wrong-track-warn-of-trouble-ahead-for-gen-a-children/>

²⁰ (2023, January). State of the American Family: Parent Voters Believe the U.S. is on the Wrong Track & Warn of Trouble Ahead for Gen-A Children <https://nationalparentsunion.org/2023/02/06/state-of-the-american-family-parent-voters-believe-the-u-s-is-on-the-wrong-track-warn-of-trouble-ahead-for-gen-a-children/>

PART III: THE ABILITY TO LIVE A HEALTHY LIFE THAT ALLOWS INDIVIDUALS TO REALIZE THEIR ABILITIES

50 percent of families identify the COVID-19 pandemic affecting kids' mental health as a big problem for Generation A's future.²¹

The pandemic and current economic conditions have created an intense mental health emergency for young people in our country.

Mental health is a state of well-being that allows individuals to realize their abilities, cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively and contribute positively to their community.

Parents across the country have reported that they are concerned about their child's mental health and have seen an uptick in their student's anxiety levels since the pandemic. 63 percent of parents are concerned on how schools are addressing the mental health needs of students.²²

The American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and the Children's Hospital came together in October 2021 to declare a National State of Public Health Emergency in Children's Mental Health.²³ According to the National Survey on Children's Health, the number of children struggling with anxiety and/or depression jumped by 1.5 million kids since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁴ Nationally, about 1 in 10 children is struggling with mental health issues.²⁵

The American Academy of Pediatrics sounded the alarm regarding the number of students who are seeking emergency mental health treatment in our nation's emergency rooms. In 2019, 9% of high school students attempted suicide, equaling nearly 1 in 10 teens.²⁶

Suicide attempt numbers are even more troubling for students of color. Among American Indian or Alaska Native high school students, 25% reported attempting suicide in 2019, along with 12% of their Black peers and 13% of those of two or more races. Among heterosexual high school students of all races and ethnicities, 6% attempted suicide; whereas 23% gay, lesbian, transgender or bisexual students reported an attempt to end their own life.²⁷

**The National
Parents Union**

Living on the
Brink: The State
of the American
Family

²¹ (2023, January). State of the American Family: Parent Voters Believe the U.S. is on the Wrong Track & Warn of Trouble Ahead for Gen-A Children <https://nationalparentsunion.org/2023/02/06/state-of-the-american-family-parent-voters-believe-the-u-s-is-on-the-wrong-track-warn-of-trouble-ahead-for-gen-a-children/>

²² (2022, October 18). New parent voters poll: It's the economy, stupid! National Parents Union. <https://nationalparentsunion.org/2022/10/18/new-parent-voters-poll-its-the-economy-stupid/>

²³ American Academy of Pediatrics (2021, October 19). AAP-AACAP-CHA Declaration of a National Emergency in Child and Adolescent Mental Health. Child and Adolescent Healthy Mental Development. <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/tax-season-message-congress-should-dramatically-and-permanently-cut-child-poverty-with-an>

²⁴ The Child & Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative(n.d.). The National Survey of Children's Health. Data Resource Center for Child and Adolescent Health. <https://www.childhealthdata.org/learn-about-the-nsch/NSCH>

²⁵ CDC. (2022, June 3). Data and statistics on children's mental health. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth/data.html>

²⁶ Ivey-Stephenson, A. Z. (2020). Suicidal ideation and behaviors among high school students — youth... MMWR Supplements, 69. <https://doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.su6901a6>

²⁷ The Child & Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative(n.d.). The National Survey of Children's Health. Data Resource Center for Child and Adolescent Health. <https://www.childhealthdata.org/learn-about-the-nsch/NSCH>



**The National
Parents Union**

Living on the
Brink: The State
of the American
Family

WHAT WE COULD DO ABOUT IT:

SUPPORT FOR PROACTIVE SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING PROGRAMS: The National Parents Union supports initiatives across the country that explicitly advance the teaching of social-emotional support in our schools and communities. **45% of families believe that schools are not doing well in addressing student mental health needs.**²⁸

EXPAND ACCESS TO MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS: NPU will support initiatives to expand access to mental health programming that provides out-of-school mental health support for kids and families seeking additional support. **79% of families support providing funding directly to families of public school students to help them pay for additional mental health support for their children (e.g., counseling outside of school).**²⁹

²⁸ (2023, January). State of the American Family: Parent Voters Believe the U.S. is on the Wrong Track & Warn of Trouble Ahead for Gen-A Children <https://nationalparentsunion.org/2023/02/06/state-of-the-american-family-parent-voters-believe-the-u-s-is-on-the-wrong-track-warn-of-trouble-ahead-for-gen-a-children/>

²⁹ (2023, January). State of the American Family: Parent Voters Believe the U.S. is on the Wrong Track & Warn of Trouble Ahead for Gen-A Children https://nationalparentsunion.org/2023/02/06/state-of-the-american-family-parent-voters-believe-the-u-s-is-on-the-wrong-track-warn-of-trouble-ahead-for-gen-a-children

CONCLUSION

It is absolutely critical that leaders across the country make the 2023 legislative session the *Year of the Kid*.

If we don't, we face a future that is more uncertain than ever for rising generations. This is the moment to meet — we need bold, courageous action that ensures that every child who grows up in the United States is prepared for a life of opportunity.

**The National
Parents Union**

Living on the
Brink: The State
of the American
Family

ABOUT THE NATIONAL PARENTS UNION

The National Parents Union is a network of highly effective parent organizations and grassroots activists across the country that is united behind a set of common goals and principles to channel the power of parents. Our family advocates improve the quality of life for children across the United States and define the education conversation.

Learn more at: <https://nationalparentsunion.org/>