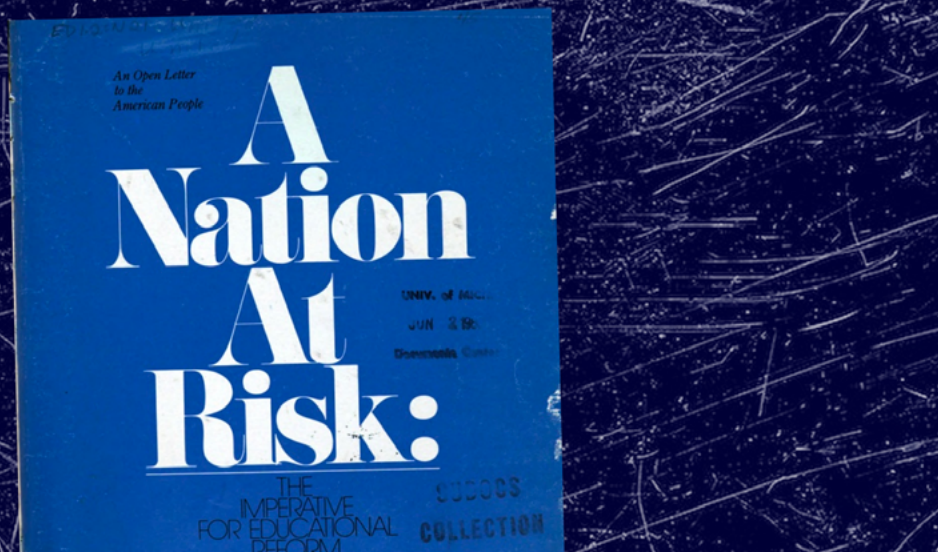




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# **A NATION AT RISK: 40 Years Later**

*The National Parents Union  
May 2023*



## INTRODUCTION

Forty years after “A Nation At Risk” was released, we find the nation’s children, our families and our nation finds itself more at risk than ever. While political divides grow deeper minute by minute, the decisions we make today to improve the nation’s public education will decide the future of today’s students and generations of Americans to come. **Now is the moment for all of us to act with urgency and a renewed commitment to courageous leadership. The future of our nation is at stake.**

**54% of parents say that K-12 Education in the US has generally fallen behind the times by not evolving to reflect the skills students need for future success in a changing world, or by not making the right kind of changes.**<sup>1</sup>

After an unprecedented challenge where our children have missed key social and education milestones, this moment must be met with the urgency, collaboration and focus they deserve to be prepared for the jobs and economy of the future and our communities across the nation continue to thrive and prosper.

As we reflect on the last 40 years of academic progress in the United States, while there are areas to celebrate, we still struggle to confront significant challenges locked in ideological battles that stifle innovation and progress and have slowed us down during a time that calls for ensuring that every child is prepared for the future.

Our country’s children have faced major setbacks due to COVID and continued systematic inequity. For two years, they faced social isolation from friends, extended family and activities and challenges that came with remote learning and school closures. As a result, academic progress made over the 10 years prior was nearly wiped out. Fourth and eighth grade math scores on the 2022 National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) dropped further than ever since testing began in 1990, while reading scores indicate that fourth and eighth graders are back to levels from over thirty years ago.<sup>2</sup>

So what do we do? How can we ensure student learning is accelerating as part of a more equitable education system where every child thrives?

In this paper, we explore solutions policymakers can take, and challenges they must address, to remedy the effects of the pandemic and contribute to a more equitable, resilient education system. Learnings from the last 40 years can and should inform policymakers’ decision-making as we strive to improve the educational experiences and futures for kids across the United States.

<sup>1</sup> (2023, May). New Poll Shows the Nation’s Education System and American Families are in Crisis – Who Will Help Parents in the Rescue Mission? <https://nationalparentsunion.org/2023/05/10/npu-may-poll-2023/>

<sup>2</sup> Sparks, S. D. (2022, October 28). Two decades of progress nearly gone: National math, reading scores hit historic lows. Education Week. <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/two-decades-of-progress-nearly-gone-national-math-reading-scores-hit-historic-lows/2022/10>

## “A NATION AT RISK” IN 1983

“A Nation at Risk” was published in 1983 by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. The report warned that the American education system was failing to provide students with the knowledge and skills needed to compete in a global economy, and was therefore putting the country’s future at risk.

The call to action was a wake-up call for educators, policymakers, and the public at large, highlighting the urgent need to improve the American education system to ensure the future prosperity of the nation.

The report highlighted several issues to address and recommended several reforms, including higher standards for graduation, more rigorous teacher training and certification and a greater emphasis on core subjects such as mathematics and science. The report also called for increased parental involvement in education and greater accountability for schools and teachers.

## “A NATION AT RISK” IN 1983

After “A Nation at Risk” was released, there were notable moments of policy advancements that refined and improved public education, notably:

- **2002: THE NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND (NCLB) ACT** was signed into law in 2002, aimed to improve student achievement in the United States by requiring annual testing of students in grades 3-8 in reading and math, and holding schools accountable for the results. Under NCLB, schools that did not meet their annual progress goals for two or more years in a row were subject to a series of escalating consequences, including the possibility of being taken over by the state or closed.
- **2009: RACE TO THE TOP** was launched by the Obama administration in 2009, aimed to improve student achievement and prepare students for success in college and careers. The initiative provided competitive grants to states that demonstrated a commitment to education reform, with a particular emphasis on higher standards, teacher effectiveness, and data-driven decision-making.
- **2015: THE EVERY STUDENT SUCCEEDS ACT (ESSA)** passed in 2015 to replace the No Child Left Behind Act. ESSA continues to emphasize the importance of assessment and accountability in education, while also giving states more flexibility in how they use federal funds and measure student achievement. Like earlier efforts, ESSA recognizes the importance of setting high standards for student achievement and using data to measure progress and identify areas for improvement. Under ESSA, states are required to administer annual assessments in reading and math to students in grades 3-8 and once in high school. These assessments are used to identify schools that are struggling to meet academic standards and to provide support and interventions to those schools. ESSA also requires states to develop plans to improve teacher quality and to provide support for English language learners and students with disabilities.

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# STRATEGIES THAT HAVE DEMONSTRATED POSITIVE IMPACT ON STUDENT PROGRESS:

## 1. COMMITMENT TO ASSESSMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY FOR MEANINGFUL, MEASURABLE RESULTS

91% of parents strongly support requiring public schools to assess each students' reading level to identify whether they need additional support.<sup>3</sup>

Student assessment data has played a critical role in driving student progress by providing educators with a clear picture of student learning and identifying areas where students need additional support or instruction. By analyzing assessment data, teachers can determine what concepts and skills students have mastered and where they may be struggling, allowing them to tailor instruction and support to meet individual student needs. Additionally, assessment data can help educators track student progress over time, identify patterns in student learning, and adjust instructional strategies as needed. By using assessment data to inform instruction, educators can help ensure that all students have the opportunity to reach their full potential and achieve academic success.

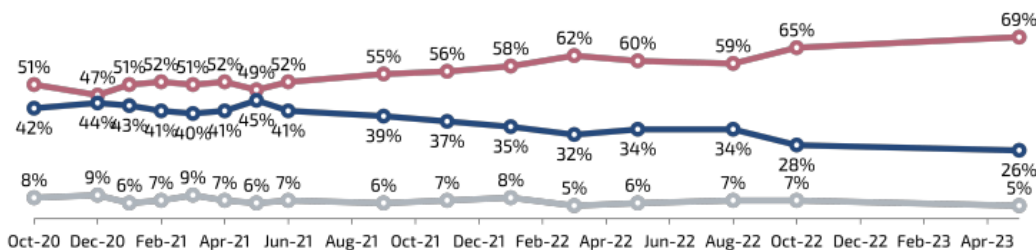
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### Support for statewide testing has risen over time

Q. There has been some debate about whether or not schools should administer statewide academic tests this school year. Even if neither one perfectly describes your views, which of the following statements do you agree with more?

- Even though we are in challenging times, we should continue to assess how well students are learning using statewide tests so that we can compare results to previous years and schools can identify areas students may be falling behind or need support.
- Since we are in challenging times, we should take a break from statewide testing this year so that teachers and students have one less thing to worry about.
- Unsure



## 2. HIGHER STANDARDS FOR STUDENT PERFORMANCE

65% of parents say schools need to do more to accomplish ensuring all students have the opportunity to get a high-quality education.<sup>4</sup>

When we love our students, we believe that they are capable of meeting high expectations. Advancements in education reform are rooted in a commitment to ensure students are better prepared for college and career success by setting higher standards for what students should know and be able to do at each grade level. This led to the adoption of more challenging academic standards, such as the Common Core State Standards, which specify what students should learn in each grade level in English Language Arts and Mathematics. These standards emphasize critical thinking, problem-solving, and analytical skills, and require students to demonstrate a deeper understanding of the material.



### 3. INCREASED COMMITMENT TO INTERVENTIONS FOR CHRONICALLY UNDERPERFORMING SCHOOLS AND DISTRICTS

*64% of parents say the government should do more to try to help chronically underperforming schools.<sup>5</sup>*

Accountability measures put in place during NCLB and continued during ESSA, ensure resources and interventions are provided to chronically underperforming school districts and schools. Monitoring district and school performance is made possible by quality assessments and a commitment from state education agencies to adapt as needed and provide differentiated resources to struggling students.

### 4. INCREASED ACCESS TO INNOVATIVE NEW OPTIONS FOR STUDENTS

*87% of parents believe that they should have the right to access a variety of educational opportunities and choose the best one for their child.<sup>6</sup>*

One of the most notable disruptions in education over the past two decades is the emphasis on ensuring more families have access to high-quality school choice options, giving families the ability to seek out individualized education options that allow their child to thrive. Five states still have not yet adopted policies to open new high-quality school options and many state new school authorizing policies continue to be a barrier to opening new schools with communities.

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<sup>3</sup> NPU National Parent Poll, May 11, 2023

<sup>4</sup> NPU National Parent Poll, May 11, 2023

<sup>5</sup> NPU National Parent Poll, May 11, 2023

<sup>6</sup> NPU National Parent Poll, March, 2023

# THE CHALLENGES WE FACE AHEAD

## 1. STUDENT LITERACY AND MATH PROFICIENCY IS CONCERNINGLY LOW

*81% of parents support setting a national goal for all public school students to be able to read at grade level by the time they are in 3rd grade.*

Thirty-two percent (32%) of our country's fourth graders were proficient readers according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress.<sup>7</sup> That means that seven out of 10 of our current fifth graders cannot fully engage in their learning because they cannot read the content. States across the country have moved this year to pass literacy bills that guarantee that districts, schools and teachers are utilizing best practices when teaching kids to read and supporting them with appropriate interventions when they are behind. Additionally, states like Alabama have started to implement new strategies to support math learners.

## 2. LAGGING STUDENT PROGRESS

*81% of parents identify K-12 students being behind academically after covid as a crisis or major problem for our country.*

In addition to seeing concerning levels of proficiency in all 50 states last year, we are also observing a slow down in the pace in which students are making academic progress - which is particularly concerning given students are further behind than ever before. We know that utilizing the traditional seven- hour school day as a way to accelerate learning will simply not be enough to catch kids up to grade level. We urge districts, states and the federal government to consider creative ways to invest in extensions of learning including opportunities like an extended school year, subsidized summer programming and extended learning opportunity grants to families.

## 3. LACK OF DIRECTION TOWARD THE FUTURE

*75% of parents believe that K-12 public schools are doing a very well or somewhat well job at preparing students for future careers.<sup>8</sup>*

In order to prepare kids for the jobs of tomorrow, we must be intentional about career connected learning, dual enrollment, pathways programming and providing access to affordable, high quality post secondary options. Over the last 10 years we saw exciting gains in graduation rates and college attendance, which should be recognized and continued. As we continue to evolve, we must find ways to ensure that every child has the opportunity to build a life of contribution and fulfillment.

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## 4. BARRIERS TO ACCESSING GREAT OPTIONS FOR EVERY STUDENT

*81% of parents support offering the option and transportation for students to transfer to higher performing schools if they choose.*

Open enrollment policies continue to improve across the country but the reality for many students still remains: your zip code determines your ability to access a quality education. We encourage lawmakers across the country to continue to pass policies that break down redlining in education by increasing school options, strengthening access to student transportation, and removing barriers to participation in open enrollment. According to a parent survey by the National Center for Education Statistics, one out of five parents surveyed reported having to move neighborhoods to gain access to a school of their choice.<sup>9</sup>

## 5. INCREASED ATTEMPTS TO LIMIT STUDENT LEARNING

*90% of parents believe that students should be taught using educational materials that are historically accurate.*

Across the country, student freedoms are being rolled back. Alarming rates of book and curriculum bans, increasing 38% in the last two years, are limiting student access to information.<sup>10</sup> Four million American students are now sitting in classrooms where they have unequal access to the information their peers are learning.

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<sup>7</sup> National Center for Education Statistics (2013). The Nation's Report Card: Trends in Academic Progress 2012 (NCES 2013-456). National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, Washington, D.C.

<sup>8</sup> National Parents Poll March 2023

<sup>9</sup> <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=6>

<sup>10</sup> American Library Association Report

<sup>11</sup> <https://pen.org/report/banned-usa-growing-movement-to-censor-books-in-schools/>

# CONCLUSION

As families across the country worry about their childrens' future, we can't help but wonder what it could look like to dramatically increase interventions, supports, and access for our students. While the National Parents Union continues to press elected officials across the country in our school districts, our state houses and our nation's capitol, we know one thing to be true: In the past 40 years, courageous leadership made gains for our children and that has led to progress.

We urge the leaders of today to be bold, and continue the vision-setting work that originated 40 years ago as we tackle the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead, always remembering that, without high-quality education, we are indeed a nation at risk.

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## CHILD WELLNESS INDICATORS

	<b>A CHILD IN 1983</b>	<b>A CHILD IN 2023</b>
Child poverty %	15.2% <sup>11</sup>	16.9% (2021) <sup>12</sup>
4th grade reading proficiency	233 (1980) <sup>13</sup>	217 (2022) <sup>14</sup>
8th grade math proficiency	269 (1982) <sup>15</sup>	274 (2022) <sup>16</sup>
Graduation rate %	73.8 <sup>17</sup>	88.6 (2020) <sup>18</sup>
Drop out rate %	14% <sup>17</sup>	6% <sup>19</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. (2011, September 14). Poverty rate second-highest in 45 years; record numbers lacked health insurance, lived in deep poverty. <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-rate-second-highest-in-45-years-record-numbers-lacked-health-insurance-lived-in>

<sup>13</sup> Census Bureau. (2022, October 4). U.S. poverty rate is 12.8% but varies significantly by age groups. <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2022/10/poverty-rate-varies-by-age-groups.html>

<sup>14</sup> National Center for Education Statistics (2013). The Nation's Report Card: Trends in Academic Progress 2012 (NCES 2013-456). National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, Washington, D.C. See Digest of Education Statistics 2013, table 221.85.

<sup>15</sup> Sparks, S. D. (2022, October 28). Two decades of progress nearly gone: National math, reading scores hit historic lows. Education Week. <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/two-decades-of-progress-nearly-gone-national-math-reading-scores-hit-historic-lows/2022/10>

<sup>16</sup> National Center for Education Statistics (2013). The Nation's Report Card: Trends in Academic Progress 2012 (NCES 2013-456). National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, Washington, D.C. See Digest of Education Statistics 2013, table 221.85

<sup>17</sup> Sparks, S. D. (2022, October 28). Two decades of progress nearly gone: National math, reading scores hit historic lows. Education Week. <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/two-decades-of-progress-nearly-gone-national-math-reading-scores-hit-historic-lows/2022/10>

<sup>18</sup> National Center for Education Statistics. (2008). Table 100. Public high school graduates, by region and state or jurisdiction: Selected years, 1969-70 through 2004-05. [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d07/tables/dt07\\_100.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d07/tables/dt07_100.asp)

<sup>19</sup> U.S. News & World Report. (2022, April 26). See high school graduation rates by state. <https://www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools/articles/see-high-school-graduation-rates-by-state>

<sup>20</sup> <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2020/2020117.pdf>





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