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ECONOMIC VITALITY AND EDUCATION IN THE SOUTH

Part II: Projections for a Post-Pandemic South





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PRESIDENT'S LETTER

Dear Reader,

Thank you for engaging with *Economic Vitality and Education in the South, Part II: Projections for a Post-Pandemic South (EVES II)*. This report examines what may prove to be a defining line in American education: the COVID-19 pandemic and the era that followed.

When the Southern Education Foundation released the original *EVES* report in 2022, we identified troubling trends in educational access, workforce preparation, and opportunity, particularly for students who have been systematically underserved. *EVES II* revisits those trends and asks a pressing question: Have these challenges eased, or have they intensified?

The data suggest that in many areas, disparities have deepened. Learning loss, chronic absenteeism, limited access to advanced coursework, and workforce misalignment now intersect with rapid technological change, including the expansion of artificial intelligence. These forces are reshaping how students learn and how our nation competes economically.

This moment demands urgency and clarity. The United States cannot afford to graduate students unprepared for a technology-driven global economy. We must strengthen educational pathways that lead to in-demand careers and ground our actions in evidence. Decades of research show what improves outcomes at scale. Strengthening public education systems, aligning resources with proven strategies, cultivating meaningful and supportive connections among students, schools, families, and communities, and refining policies based on what works are practical necessities. No matter where students live or attend school, it is imperative that they receive an equitable education.

Federal shifts, technological advances, and post-pandemic recovery efforts are converging at once. How we respond will determine whether the South, and the nation, can build a workforce prepared to sustain economic vitality in the decades ahead.

The findings in this report are intended to inform that response. The stakes are high, but so is the opportunity. With seriousness of purpose and a commitment to results, we can ensure educational opportunity strengthens both our economy and our democracy.

Sincerely,



RAYMOND PIERCE

President & CEO, Southern Education Foundation



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Six years since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, data raise increasing concerns about the United States' ability to meet our national workforce and social needs without substantial improvements to students' educational access and opportunity.

With the pandemic as both a clear inflection point and an opportunity for change, where do we go from here?

Introduction

Projections for a Post-Pandemic South, the second report in the *EVES* series from the Southern Education Foundation (SEF), uses post-pandemic and projective data to outline potential and currently anticipated outcomes in the education-to-workforce pipeline over the next decade across the 17 states in the SEF region: Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia.

Since 2020, the proportion of Americans living in the SEF region has grown at a rate far higher than any other region — nearly three times the rate of the next-fastest-growing U.S. region. The South is also the only Census region in which K-12 student enrollment increased between 2013 and 2023, and the region is now home to more than two of every five U.S. public school students. Together with a history of disinvestment in the South, this rapid growth only increases the urgent need to understand and address these challenges in the region, which are likely to have a significant impact on the workforce and economy in the South and nationally. Particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the South and the nation must take stock of current economic and educational projections for the next decade to determine whether we are on track to meet our national needs.

Workforce Preparation and National Needs

Recent job and industry growth projections from the Bureau of Labor Statistics anticipate increased demand in key industries like health, information, business services, and community and social services — all of which help to keep ourselves, our families, and our communities safe and healthy and ensure the U.S. will remain domestically strong and internationally competitive. Yet the data cited in this report show disparities in educational access and outcomes that are shrinking the pool of students who will have the chance to take on these roles. If current trends continue, the U.S. — and especially the South — runs a serious risk of failing to address these needs.

However, these data also suggest ways to disrupt these patterns. Across early care and education (ECE), K-12 schooling, and postsecondary education in the United States, they show that increased access and opportunity can lead to more educational success and improved workforce outcomes for more students.

Through the lens of a Social Determinants of Education framework, this report addresses key data and projections for students and teachers across early childhood, K-12, and postsecondary education:

- Children's participation in high-quality ECE programs is linked to improved educational and workforce outcomes, multiple longitudinal studies show, but these levels remain extremely low.



- Improving access to early learning programs has the potential to return caregivers to the workforce, lift young children out of poverty, and save the country money, with a return on investment as high as 13%.
- Under federal law, public schools provide key protections for students' civil rights, health, and well-being that are not guaranteed elsewhere. Yet, COVID-era decreases in public school enrollment, the expansion of private school voucher programs, and other policies that limit resources for public schools have increased the challenges they face in serving all students well.
- Unequal funding across schools and districts — including huge differences between high-poverty and low-poverty districts and even larger gaps between districts with the highest and lowest proportion of students of color — creates further disparities that limit many students' access to a high-quality education. Without adjustments to state funding formulas, these disparities are expected to worsen.
- Rapidly developing educational technology (EdTech) has greatly expanded possibilities for teaching and learning, but data show serious challenges to both access and quality of use, raising concerns that for many schools and students technology may increase disparities rather than mitigate them.
- Wide disparities also persist in students' access to rigorous coursework and effective postsecondary and career preparation. Increasing curriculum censorship — often enforced by law — threatens to widen that gap even further.
- Schools serve a primary role in connecting students to postsecondary and workforce opportunities. Increasing the number of students who can access high-quality education and succeed in public schools can substantially increase postsecondary success and grow the skilled workforce — while failing to protect access and opportunity can further shrink these numbers.
- While postsecondary enrollment across all U.S. institutions is projected to grow through 2030, the costs of attending four-year colleges continue to skyrocket, and the number of students with federal student loans has grown.



- Many postsecondary options that are more accessible to students and can provide more effective transitions into the workforce — including historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), community colleges, and certification/training programs such as HVAC repair — are underused, underresourced, and undervalued.
- Rising costs, high levels of student debt, and other challenges can limit students' ability to take full advantage of their postsecondary education and opportunities to build wealth after completion. These barriers can also inhibit students from completing their degrees altogether, raising questions about whether the postsecondary system can function as a gateway to greater financial stability.
- Research in both education and economics finds teachers to be the most important school-level factor in student achievement. However, across the education continuum, low teacher pay compared with most other professions and high levels of stress are contributing to acute teacher shortages.
- A politically fraught environment in the U.S. is challenging what teachers can discuss in the classroom, adding to their high levels of stress and limiting their ability to teach an accurate, authentic curriculum that reflects the students they serve. Despite this, schools are striving to support students' development holistically, and dedicated educators are working every day to do so.
- Artificial Intelligence (AI) and other EdTech can create powerful learning tools for schools and students. However, without thoughtful and careful implementation, these tools can also perpetuate or even increase disparities — for example, through the replication of existing biases in seemingly “neutral” algorithms.



**Research in
both education and
economics finds teachers
to be the most important
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student achievement.**

PREFACE: HOW TO READ THIS REPORT AND WHY IT HAS BEEN WRITTEN

Purpose and Overview of This Report

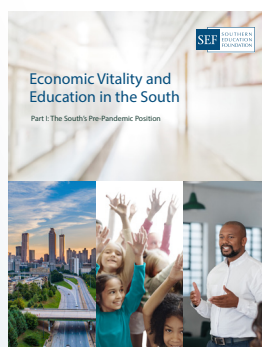
This report extends the Southern Education Foundation's prior analysis in reports published over the last several years by laying out expectations and potential for future developments and trends in a range of key educational and education-adjacent areas. This includes predictions based on current data, as well as a discussion of possible alternative outcomes given potential changes to practice and policy that can be made in the early childhood, K-12, and postsecondary spaces.

In 2022, SEF released *Economic Vitality and Education in the South, Part I: The South's Pre-Pandemic Position (EVES I)*. This report analyzed a wide range of pre-pandemic (i.e., 2019 and before) data relating to many of the items contained in SEF's Social Determinants of Education framework (see below), which links educational opportunity to other inputs, including poverty and food insecurity, criminal justice, early care and education (ECE), and the effects of income and wealth disparities. At the time of that report, data from the pandemic were mostly just beginning to be analyzed and better understood.

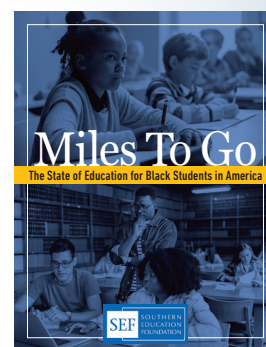
EVES I focused on drawing conclusions about what those data showed about the state of education in the South when the pandemic started and the challenges they laid bare. This report extends that analysis by addressing expectations for the post-pandemic *future*. It focuses on projections from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Institute of Education Sciences (and in particular its National Center for Education Statistics), the Civil Rights Data Collection, and a range of other federal and non-federal sources. Drawing on these data, it outlines

up-to-date, best-evidence predictions and analysis for future outcomes in education and their impact on economic vitality in the South and in the nation at large. Each chapter concludes with a Looking Ahead section that synthesizes these projective data and expectations to delineate both the expected outcomes they currently predict and potential alternative pathways that data and evidence suggest may be possible. Given the critical impact of technology on students' educational experiences and opportunities, a full final chapter is devoted to this topic. Throughout the report, examples of current programs and approaches that have been shown to hold promise for education improvement in the South and nationally are highlighted as illustrative examples of work that is being done to increase student access, improve educational outcomes, and bring about beneficial results for the future. The current post-pandemic projection data cited in this report point toward grave educational and economic challenges if trajectories are not changed.

Read other reports from SEF



Economic Vitality and Education in the South, Part I: The South's Pre-Pandemic Position



Miles to go: The State of Education for Black Students in America

The COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic had a devastating impact on many communities in the U.S. and across the globe. In the U.S., for example, more than 1.2 million deaths have been confirmed to date,¹ and approximately 300,000 U.S. children had been orphaned by COVID as of 2023.² In both cases, these rates are highly disproportionate by race and ethnicity: The age-adjusted rates of COVID-deaths³ for Indigenous, Black, and Hispanic Americans (614, 513, and 493 per 100,000, respectively) are all more than 50% higher than the rate for White Americans (315 per 100,000) and more than twice the rate for Asian Americans (228 per 100,000). Disproportionalities among children who lost parents to COVID are even greater — compared to rates per 100,000 for Asian and White Americans, more than 50% more Hispanic Americans, more than twice as many Black Americans, and more than *four times* as many American Indian/Alaska Native students lost parents to the disease.⁴ These disproportionalities related to race and ethnicity, while very useful in capturing the consequences of systemic barriers to economic and educational opportunities for some groups compared to others (i.e., Asian Americans), also do not fully reflect the varying histories of different ethnicities within racial groups (e.g., Filipino and Japanese, Caribbean and African American, Mexican

and Puerto Rican). Overall, nearly 1 in 3 Americans are confirmed to have been infected by COVID-19,⁵ which in many cases led to long-term health issues (i.e., Long COVID)⁶ or permanent disability.⁷



- 1 Mathieu, E., Ritchie, H., Rod s-Guirao, L., Appel, C., Gavrilov, D., Giattino, C., Hasell, J., Macdonald, B., Dattani, S., Beltekian, D., Ortiz-Ospina, E., & Roser, M. (2020). *Coronavirus (COVID-19) deaths*. OurWorldinData.org. Retrieved April 1, 2026 from <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-deaths> — this estimate certainly does not reflect the true number of lives lost.
- 2 Hillis, S. D., Blenkinsop, A., Villaveces, A., Annor, F. B., Liburd, L., Massetti, G. M., Demissie, Z., Mercy, J. A., Nelson, C. A., Cluver, L., Flaxman, S., Sherr, L., Donnelly, C. A., Ratmann, O., & Unwin, H. J. (2021). *COVID-19–associated orphanhood and caregiver death in the United States*. *Pediatrics*, 148(6): e2021053760. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2021-053760>
- 3 This adjustment accounts for the distribution of age by race and ethnicity. For example, the proportion of elderly White Americans is much higher than the proportion of elderly Hispanic Americans, inflating the raw number of White American deaths vs. Hispanic American deaths due to the increased susceptibility of older individuals to COVID-19. The Centers for Disease Control notes that adjusting COVID-19 data by age “is important because risk of infection, hospitalization, and death is different by age, and age distribution differs by racial and ethnic group. If the effect of age is not accounted for, racial and ethnic disparities can be underestimated or overestimated.” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2023). *Risk for COVID-19 infection, hospitalization, and death by race/ethnicity*. Retrieved March 1, 2026 from <https://archive.cdc.gov/#/details?url=https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/covid-data/investigations-discovery/hospitalization-death-by-race-ethnicity.html>
- 4 Hillis, S.D., Blenkinsop, A., Villaveces, A., Annor, F.B., Liburd, L., Massetti, G.M., Demissie, Z., Mercy, J.A., Nelson, C.A., Cluver, L., Flaxman, S., Sherr, L., Donnelly, C.A., Ratmann, O., Unwin, H.J. (2021). COVID-19–Associated Orphanhood and Caregiver Death in the United States. *Pediatrics*, 148(6): e2021053760. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34620728/> — 335 Asian children per 100,000 were orphaned, compared with 383 White children per 100,000, 608 Hispanic children per 100,000, 831 Black children per 100,000, and 1546 American Indian/Alaskan Native children per 100,000.
- 5 Mathieu, E., Ritchie, H., Rod s-Guirao, L., Appel, C., Gavrilov, D., Giattino, C., Hasell, J., Macdonald, B., Dattani, S., Beltekian, D., Ortiz-Ospina, E., & Roser, M. (2020). *Coronavirus (COVID-19) cases*. Retrieved April 1, 2026 from <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-cases>
- 6 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2021). *Guidance on “Long COVID” as a disability under the ADA, Section 504, and Section 1557*. Retrieved December 1, 2025 from <https://www.hhs.gov/civil-rights/for-providers/civil-rights-covid19/guidance-long-covid-disability/index.html>
- 7 Fleischer, N., Slocum, E., Patel, A., Xie, Y., McKane, P., Lyon-Callo, S., & Hirschtick, J. (2025). Long COVID and new onset disability nearly 2 years after initial infection. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 68(6), 1168–1172. [https://www.ajpmonline.org/article/S0749-3797\(25\)00076-5/fulltext](https://www.ajpmonline.org/article/S0749-3797(25)00076-5/fulltext)

These effects raise significant workforce challenges. The national unemployment rate in April 2020 reached 14.8%, and these outcomes were also disproportionate by race and ethnicity. Black and Hispanic workers experienced unemployment at higher rates than White workers (16.7% and 18.5%, respectively, compared with 14.1%), and Black unemployment rates also recovered more slowly, with July 2021 rates at 8.2% compared with 4.8% for White workers.⁸ This has occurred even as population growth has continued to slow in the U.S. since the pandemic. Projections in 2017 indicated an estimated population of 355.1 million by the year 2030,⁹ while 2023 projections shrink the estimated U.S. population in 2030 to 345 million, 10 million less than expected and only about 1.5 million more than the estimated population as of June 2026.¹⁰

There has also been a significant drop in the projected level of international migration to the U.S. Prior to the pandemic, 2017 projections predicted a net migration of 1,064,000 people in 2030,¹¹ but census estimates in 2023 showed a predicted net migration of only 879,000.¹² Further, a 2026 report from the Brookings Institution suggested that in 2025 the U.S. had a *negative* net migration for the first time in at least 50 years, pointing toward potentially even lower figures than the census estimates.¹³

The Pandemic's Effects on Schools and Learning

The pandemic also dramatically impacted schooling and student learning in the United States. By spring 2020, two-thirds of child care programs were closed,¹⁴ 77 percent of public K-12 schools had shifted to virtual learning environments, and 84 percent of college students reported having at least some of their classes switched to online instruction.¹⁵ The shift to online and asynchronous learning brought an increased reliance on learning management systems and other tools to manage course completion. Technology needs, and use, increased greatly, although not all students had adequate access. A large majority of students lost the ability to interact in person with their teachers and instructors.

The difficulty of teaching online across age ranges disrupted relationships between teachers and students and created unforeseen challenges for students, families, and educational institutions. Many student learning opportunities were interrupted, and educators were forced to rethink some of the most fundamental concepts of schooling. By fall 2021, many educational institutions had begun to return to in-person learning,¹⁶ but the effects of this educational interruption on both students and institutions were profound: Preschool enrollment had dropped by 18%, the first pre-K enrollment decrease in two decades,

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- 8 Falk, G., Nicchitta, I.A., Nyhof, E., & Romero, P.D. (2021). *Unemployment rates during the COVID-19 pandemic*. (CRS Report No. R46554). Retrieved April 1, 2026 from <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R46554>
- 9 United States Census Bureau. (2017). *2017 national population projections table*. <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2017/demo/popproj/2017-summary-tables.html>
- 10 United States Census Bureau. (2023). *2023 national population projections tables: Main series*. <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2023/demo/popproj/2023-summary-tables.html>
- 11 United States Census Bureau. (2017). *2017 national population projections table*. <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2017/demo/popproj/2017-summary-tables.html>
- 12 United States Census Bureau. (2023). *2023 national population projections tables: Main series*. <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2023/demo/popproj/2023-summary-tables.html>
- 13 Edelberg, W., Veuger, S., & Watson, T. (2026, January 13). *Macroeconomic implications of immigration flows in 2025 and 2026: January 2026 update*. The Brookings Institution. Retrieved February 1, 2026 from <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/macroeconomic-implications-of-immigration-flows-in-2025-and-2026-january-2026-update/>
- 14 Padilla, C. & Lin, Y. (2024). *Rates of child care and employment disruption during the COVID-19 pandemic for households with children under age 5: Variation by household characteristics*. Child Trends. Retrieved April 1, 2026 from <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/rates-of-child-care-and-employment-disruptions-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-for-households-with-children-under-age-5-variation-by-household-characteristics>
- 15 NCES (2022). *U.S. education in the time of COVID*. Retrieved April 1, 2026 from <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/annualreports/topical-studies/covid/?educationType=postsecondary-education>
- 16 Ibid.; For example: 98 percent of public schools across the U.S. had returned to in-person learning by Fall 2021

and postsecondary enrollment for first-time degree-seeking undergraduate students dropped by 9% between fall 2019 and fall 2020.¹⁷ In both ECE and K-12, many students had not experienced full-time in-person learning for three semesters, with some starting their earliest years of formal schooling online. Studies showed that effects of this educational interruption included unfinished student learning, stilted academic progress, negative effects on students' social and emotional skills, and increased behavioral issues and mental health concerns.¹⁸ The greatest effects were found to be on students of color, students with disabilities, and those from low-income families.¹⁹

In short, the pandemic killed huge numbers of Americans and orphaned huge numbers of children, substantially increased disparities, and interrupted education-as-usual so profoundly that our approach to teaching and learning has changed in unprecedented and irreversible ways. Addressing the effects of the pandemic is not an option but a necessity. It is also an **opportunity**. Serious education challenges and major education disparities existed well before the pandemic and were already causing substantial harm in the U.S., both economically and socially, well before it began.²⁰ The inevitability of change in the post-pandemic era also presents a new chance to change these outcomes for the better.

A New and Very Real Threat: The Danger of Data Erasure

In order to build out a clear understanding of current and expected outcomes in education, this report

draws heavily on a wide range of invaluable data and evidence, painstakingly collected by schools and researchers across the country over years and decades. The most commonly cited sources here by far are federal — including the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), and the U.S. Department of Education's Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC). The conclusions in this report could not exist without these data, which guide our understanding of education outcomes and needs and our ability to make evidence-informed and effective choices. **Yet by the time it is published, some of the data cited here may no longer be available.**

The availability of these data is paramount in ensuring the continued development of our shared knowledge in education, among many other fields. Digital data availability in recent decades has resulted in developments in education theory and practice that would simply not have been possible without it. NCES hosts thousands of current and historical datasets, in addition to its seemingly endless pages of analysis, guides, tools, and other resources. The widespread availability of such large amounts of data has greatly increased our understanding of outcomes in education and strengthened our ability to address challenges for all students in evidence-based ways.

However, data that had been freely and easily available online have begun to disappear. In October 2024, SEF published its most recent landmark report, *Miles To Go: The State of Education for Black Students in America*. By October 2025, one year later, multiple citations of

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- 17 Friedman-Krauss, A., Barnett, W.S., Garver, K., Hodges, K., Weisenfeld, G.G., Gardiner, B.A., & Jost, T.M. (2022). *The state of preschool 2021: State preschool yearbook*. National Institute for Early Education Research. https://nieer.org/sites/default/files/2023-10/YB2021_Full_Report.pdf
- 18 NCES. (2022, July 6). *More than 80 percent of U.S. public schools report pandemic has negatively impacted student behavior and socio-emotional development*. Retrieved September 27, 2025 from https://nces.ed.gov/whatsnew/press_releases/07_06_2022.asp
- 19 Gee, K., Asmundson, V., & Vang, T. (2023). Educational impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States: Inequities by race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 52, 101643. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2023.101643>; Dvorsky, M. R., Shroff, D., Larkin Bonds, W. B., Steinberg, A., Breaux, R., & Becker, S. P. (2023). Impacts of COVID-19 on the school experience of children and adolescents with special educational needs and disabilities. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 52, 101635. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2023.101643>
- 20 Crowe, M. (2022). *Economic vitality and education in the South, part I: The South's pre-pandemic position*. Southern Education Foundation. <https://southerneducation.org/publications/economic-vitality-and-education-in-the-south-part-i-the-souths-pre-pandemic-position/>; Altman, M. (2024). *Miles to go: The state of education for Black students in America*. Southern Education Foundation. <https://southerneducation.org/what-we-do/milestogo2024/>

federal data used for that report led to broken links or empty pages. These data have not simply been moved. As of now, they are gone — removed by the federal government so the public can no longer access them. Further, many licenses to work with non-public datasets of high importance through agencies such as NCES have been cancelled, and current procedure suggests that those data may not merely be taken offline, but potentially destroyed. The loss of these data would be catastrophic; without them, much of the current effort to improve education would return to relying on guesswork.

A withdrawal of federal funding from contracts with many universities and nonprofits is also harming data access. These funds do not merely cover new research; they also support things like website and data maintenance and information sharing. This further endangers access to needed information, even outside the direct federal data systems.

Even as this report was being completed, some of the data that were available at the beginning of its construction were no longer online by the time the draft was finalized. It appears certain that multiple instances of cited data to which this report refers, which until recently were easily and readily accessible, will no longer be available to readers upon publication. It is not certain whether those data will ever be available publicly again.

While the data in this report certainly serve as evidence to back up its claims, data are not cited here merely to “prove” the accuracy of the statements contained within. The intent is also for readers to have their own access to these data, to be able to see them, interact with them, and draw conclusions from the evidence they reveal. The research cited in this report connects its content to enormous amounts of additional external content, discussion, framing, tools, datasets, and articles, and this ensures that you, the reader, have full access to the information and context being drawn on to inform the analysis. The authors of this report in many cases suggest our own analytical takeaways from the data, but we do so in reference to information that readers should

be able to see for themselves, to confirm, augment, or dispute the analysis we share through their own review and their own lenses. The federal data removal occurring at the time of this writing takes away that access, and thus takes away your ability to see the evidence and your agency in understanding the data and drawing your own conclusions.

The authors of this report have chosen not to remove any citations — or content — because of the data removal currently taking place. Rather, we have returned to the old citation practice of listing both the publication date and the retrieval date (the date at which we viewed the content) for any online federal data we cite. It is our firm hope that it will not be long until all these data are again available. Readers of this report years from its publication will know better how that story ended and whether access to key data in the U.S. was restored — or further curtailed.



INTRODUCTION: “EQUITY” MEANS “BETTER FOR EVERYONE”

The data in this report point to a clear challenge: *There is an increasingly urgent post-pandemic need for a well-prepared workforce to become the next generation of in-demand professionals. There is also clear evidence of challenges within (and outside of) the education system that limit access to the educational pathways that will get students there. In light of these issues, which evidence-based policies and practices provide the greatest opportunity for the U.S. to avoid potentially catastrophic outcomes for our economy and society?*

This is not merely a thought exercise: There is a real and pressing need to ensure continued availability of essential services in health, business, science and technology, and a number of other fields that are needed for the nation’s economic health — and the health of its people as well. If we do not address these challenges, we risk having too few doctors to provide our care, too few scientists and analysts to continue to effectively develop and maintain our technology and industrial infrastructure, and too few business services professionals to keep our economy running — a grave economic and social risk.

To avoid such calamitous outcomes, we must significantly improve students’ access to opportunities that provide the greatest possible preparation for them to develop the skills they will need for these critical roles. In this report, we refer to this idea — students having the greatest opportunities to access and to succeed across the full range of educational pathways and to successfully enter the workforce — as **equity**.

Thus, it is important to address a major misconception that has increasingly emerged in our political discourse in recent years: that the idea of “equity” means taking away from some people (e.g., the “privileged”) and

giving to others (e.g., the “underserved”), harming the former group in order to provide more to the latter. This is *not* accurate.

First, this is inaccurate because *opportunity* and *access* are not finite quantities. Beyond that, this report shows that the idea that equity harms some to help others is a misconception because **increasing opportunity and access (and resources) for more individuals in fact helps all of us. Meanwhile, the current inequities we see hurt all of us and restrict U.S. economic opportunities.**

By increasing opportunity and access, we will strengthen the pool of people who can be our innovators and problem solvers, as well as our doctors, our technicians, our scientists and engineers, and so on, and who can use our modern technology capably and well in their work. Increasing opportunities for more students to identify their interests, learn and succeed, and develop into individuals who can most effectively contribute to their communities and broader society hurts no one. Instead, this greatly increases our collective potential and will directly benefit us all. Our society’s many current challenges are more likely to be addressed by a larger pool of people who can address them. Opposing the idea of equity, especially in education, does not ensure more for some of us — it ensures *less for all of us*.

This report does not use the word “equity” with great frequency. It simply calls things what they are, such as increased access, opportunities to learn, and workforce preparation. Nevertheless, ideas like these point to challenges that are equity-related, and schools and students currently face an environment where claims of “equity as a threat” are invoked to oppose many of them specifically because they are identified as

equity-related, and thus perceived as somehow harmful. The data *do not* support this framing. Rather, the research summarized in this report shows clearly that expanding access and increasing opportunity to learn for a greater number of students is both beneficial to those students *and* beneficial to everyone. As SEF has already discussed elsewhere, including in Part I of this *EVES* series, educational equity is an economically sound goal with a huge return on investment.²¹

An important related note is that many of the data cited in this report point toward potential improvements in the public education system(s)²² to increase access and opportunity — to increase equity — and improve outcomes. This accurately reflects the evidence: There is certainly room for public schools to improve. However, it is important to be clear up front that nothing in this analysis suggests a critique of public education in the U.S. as a public good. In fact, quite the opposite is true, and such an interpretation would reflect a profound misreading of what is presented here. Rather, this report details the structural challenges within and outside of the education systems that limit students' access and

opportunity for success and prevent or restrict many of the critical beneficial outcomes the public school system is capable of producing.

The U.S. public education system(s) provide critical protections of students' civil rights and health and well-being that are not guaranteed — and often not provided — elsewhere. These protections expand access and opportunity and, as the data show, must be further reinforced, not curtailed, to meet the post-pandemic moment and create the workforce needed to keep our nation functioning. The pandemic was a critical inflection point, both in education and across many other fields; today, in its wake, disparities in the socioeconomic positions, physical environments, and health and well-being of the students who enter schools every day have only increased. Public schools — along with the early learning programs and postsecondary institutions also discussed in this report — must be supported in doing more, not less, to ensure all of these students have a legitimate opportunity to access a high-quality education and achieve positive life and workforce outcomes.



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- 21 Crowe, M. (2022). *Economic vitality and education in the South, part I: The South's pre-pandemic position*. Southern Education Foundation. <https://southerneducation.org/publications/economic-vitality-and-education-in-the-south-part-i-the-souths-pre-pandemic-position/>; Altman, M. (2024). *Miles to go: The state of education for Black students in America*. Southern Education Foundation. <https://southerneducation.org/what-we-do/milestogo2024/>
- 22 While it is common to refer to “the U.S. public education system” as one system, differences in funding, structure, and access experienced by students often lead scholars to note that students actually experience multiple education systems as they move through their education. This report refers to both “the education system” and “education systems,” acknowledging these differences in student access and experience. See the next section on the Social Determinants of Education framework for more on how different students experience different systems along their educational pathways.

The Social Determinants of Education

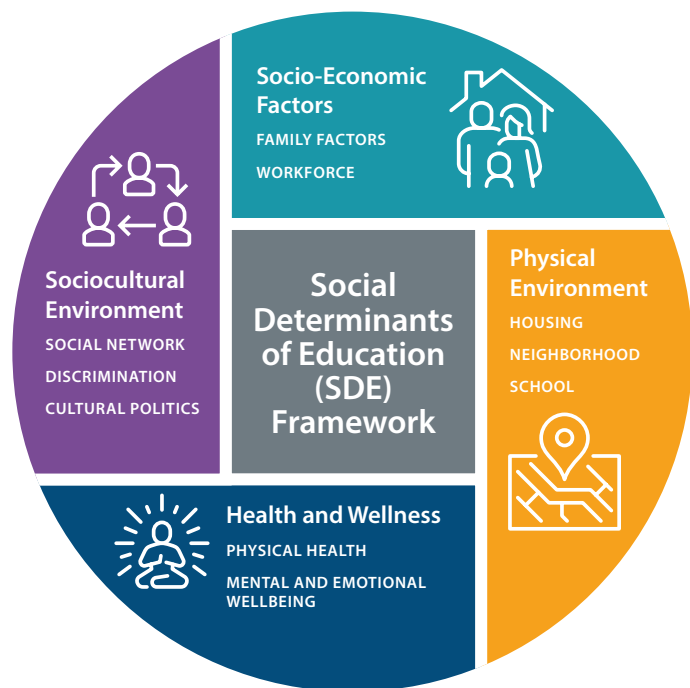
Characteristics of students’ socioeconomic, physical, and sociocultural environments, along with their health and well-being, are deeply interconnected with each other and with students’ educational opportunities. To highlight the interconnected nature of these systems as a lens through which to understand students’ needs and opportunities, this report addresses these issues through a *Social Determinants of Education* framework — which draws on the World Health Organization’s Social Determinants of Health framework²³ and others’ prior work to adapt that framework in the field of education²⁴ — as a primary lens to connect students’ educational experiences to the social structures that shape them.

Students’ experiences in school do not take place in a vacuum. Their physical and sociocultural environment, health and well-being, and a wide range of socioeconomic factors clearly impact their schooling,



school resourcing, and educational outcomes. For this reason, this report addresses both education-*centered* and education-*adjacent* issues, including how these issues interact and connect to produce the outcomes we currently see, and which potential paths forward — some beneficial and others potentially catastrophic — exist in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and at this moment of national inflection. The pandemic forced a pause in daily business and affected U.S. systems in ways that require a response; how we continue to respond may determine whether we move toward a future in which we all have what we need or one in which we have needlessly limited our own personal and economic health and well-being.

To ensure the former, we must increase the opportunity for each student to fully access the education and training essential to beneficial outcomes for us all. Equity is a shared benefit.



23 World Health Organization. (2021). Social determinants of health: Overview. Retrieved July 27, 2021, from https://www.who.int/health-topics/social-determinants-of-health#tab=tab_1

24 E.g., Heather Sammen’s 2017 social determinants of education framework: Sammen, H. C. (2017). *A social determinants of education framework*. (Publication No. 10608197) [Master’s thesis, University of Colorado at Denver]. ProQuest; the Social Determinants of Learning model developed by Chamberlain University: Chamberlain University. (2021). *Educational justice for all: A roadmap toward progress*. Retrieved December 2, 2021, from <https://www.chamberlain.edu/about/social-determinants-of-learning>

I. POST-PANDEMIC WORKFORCE PROJECTIONS AND ENABLING ECONOMIC GROWTH

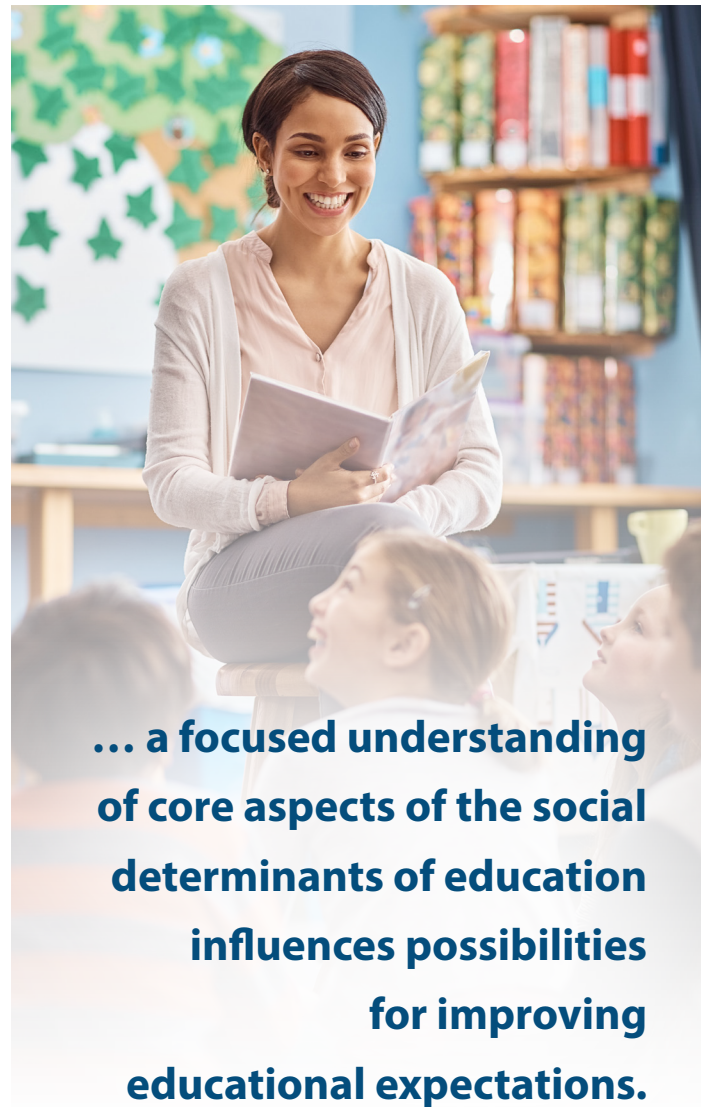
This chapter outlines post-pandemic projections for workforce and industry growth and the associated challenges highlighted by current economic and education data that raise questions about our ability to fill those expected workforce roles if present trends continue.

It includes an overview of projected workforce needs through 2033 from the Federal Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) and an analysis of the current evidence that the interconnected education and workforce systems are not on track to provide adequate access for enough students to fill those needed roles. At the end of the chapter, the *Looking Ahead* section summarizes outcome expectations based on these current data along with alternative trajectories that can increase the potential to meet these needs if changes are made — or that can even more greatly harm the ability to meet them if disparities further increase.

The next three chapters address data specific to early care and education, K-12, and postsecondary education, respectively. Each presents an analysis of what current data and post-pandemic projections say about expectations for access, opportunity, and outcomes, and how they relate to the economic projections and needs discussed here. As students continue on their pathways through the education system(s), each stop on the way can increase their access and preparation for what comes next — or can decrease these things in ways that can further limit opportunity and shrink the workforce pool.

A thorough analysis of current data and a focused understanding of core aspects of the social determinants of education — such as school climate,

physical resources, and the well-being of both students and teachers — influence possibilities for improving educational expectations. Addressing factors related to these social determinants of education offers a major opportunity to positively influence educational and workforce outcomes while meaningful change is still possible.



**... a focused understanding
of core aspects of the social
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educational expectations.**

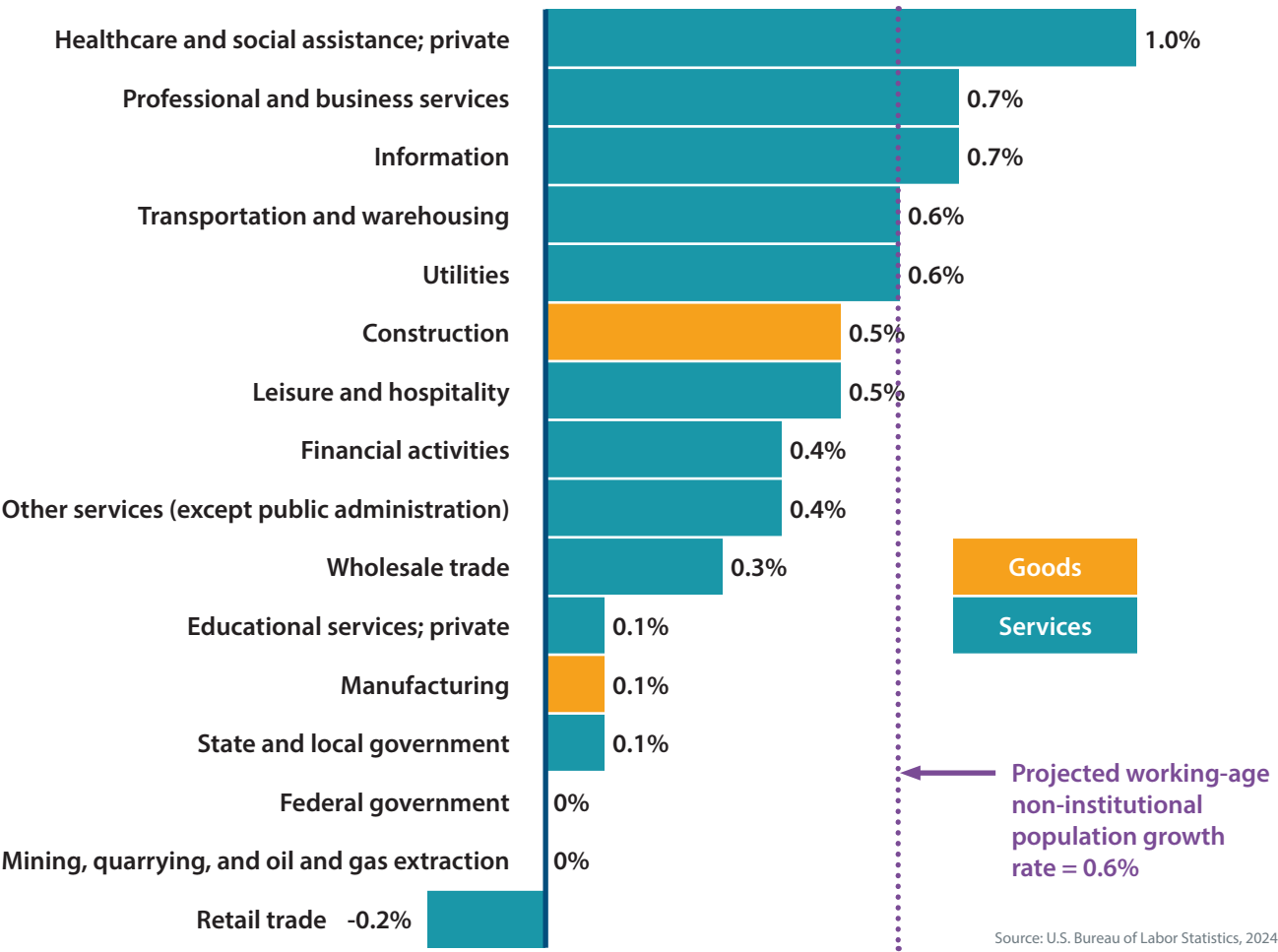
Workforce Projections Highlight Needs in Key Industries

The working-age population growth rate is declining. The BLS projects that the noninstitutional population growth rate²⁵ of those 16 or older over the decade between 2023 and 2033 will be 0.6% annually, the lowest growth rate since it began collecting these statistics and almost 5 million less in total population increase for that group than occurred between 2013

and 2023 (the labor force is expected to grow even more slowly, at 0.4%).²⁶

However, the BLS identifies a number of key industries expected to grow at that rate of 0.6% or higher.²⁷ Within these industries, BLS also identifies the 10 occupational groups expected to grow the fastest from 2023 to 2033. Much of this growth is projected in professions that require high levels of education and training such as healthcare, STEM jobs, community and social services, and professional/business operations.

Projected annual rate of change in industry employment, 2023-33

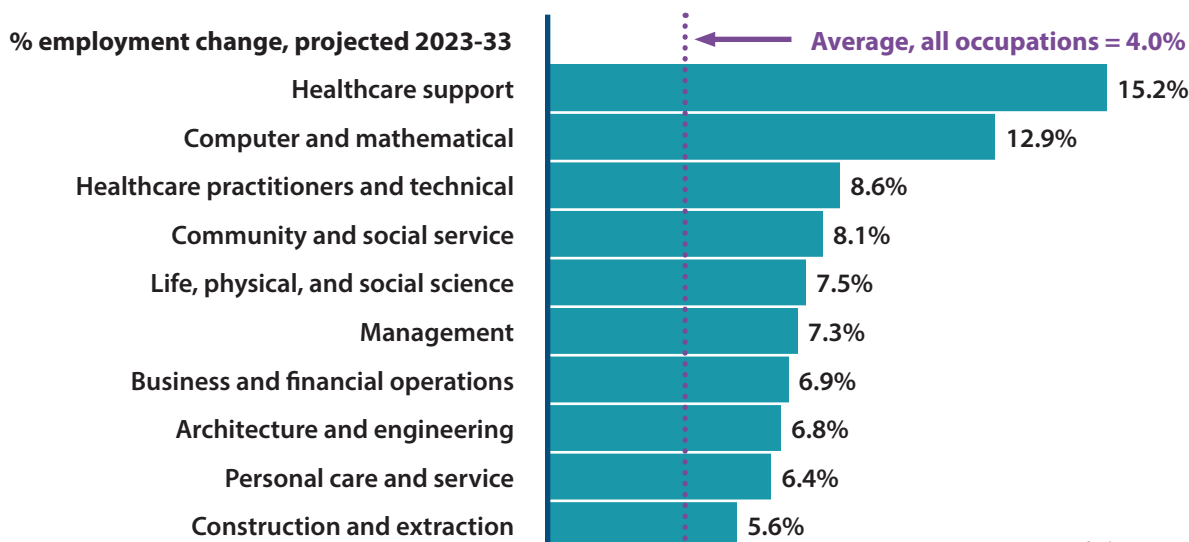


25 The noninstitutional population growth rate refers to those who are not serving in the armed forces nor in institutions such as jails, prisons, nursing homes, or mental health facilities.

26 Dubina, K.S. (2024, August). *Labor force and macroeconomic projections overview and highlights, 2023-33*. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Retrieved March 1, 2026 from <https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2024/article/labor-force-and-macroeconomic-projections-overview-and-highlights-2023-33.htm>; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2024, August 29). *Employment Projections and Occupational Outlook Handbook* [Press release]. Retrieved March 1, 2026 from https://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/ecopro_08292024.htm

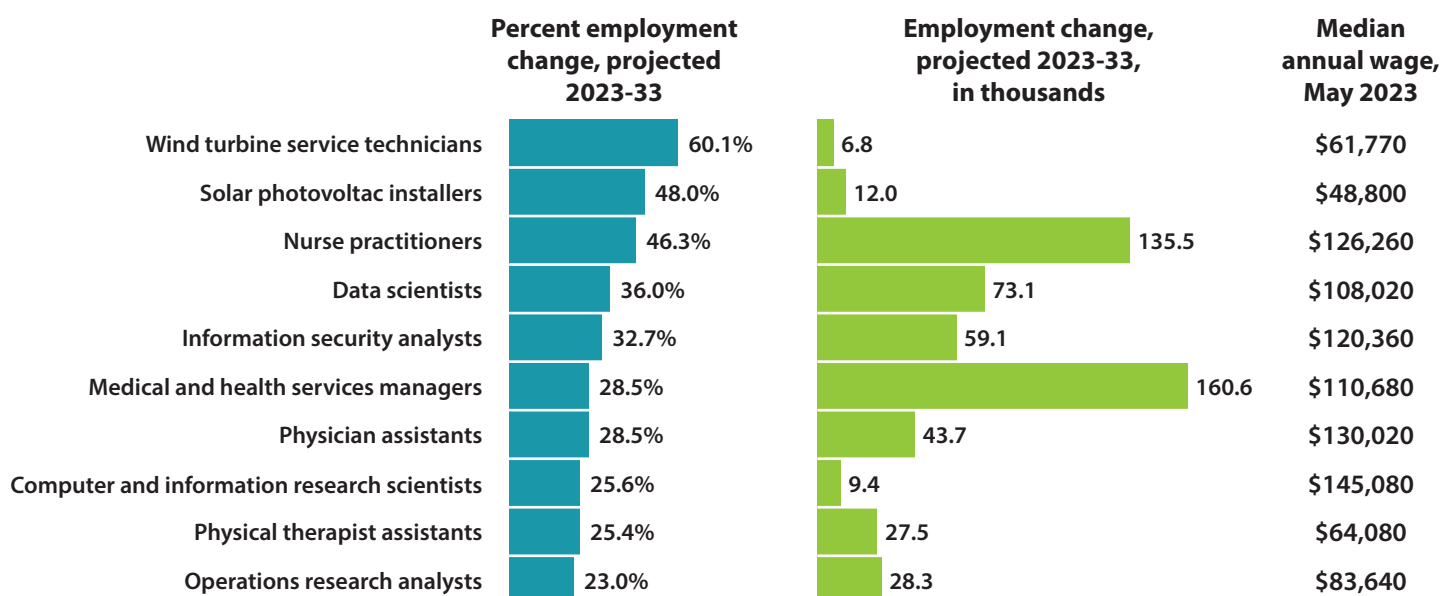
27 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2024, August 29). *Employment projections and occupational outlook handbook* [Press release]. Retrieved March 1, 2026 from https://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/ecopro_08292024.htm

Top 10 occupational groups projected to grow the fastest



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024

Top 10 fastest growing occupations



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024

This is especially relevant in the South, a region now home to more than 40% of U.S. public K-12 students,²⁸ where data show that many students of color and students from low-income families — and particularly those in historically underserved and underinvested geographic areas — have less access to STEM learning

opportunities than the already-low U.S. average.²⁹ To ensure the region and nation have the trained professionals required to provide the public health, science and technology, and professional services that will be needed in coming years, **we must increase educational opportunity for more students in the**

28 NCES. (2024). *Enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools, by region, state, and jurisdiction: Selected years, fall 1990 through fall 2023*. Retrieved March 1, 2026 from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d24/tables/dt24_203.20.asp?current=yes — for more on this, see the section on K-12 enrollment, below.

29 E.g., Mississippi Center for Justice. (2022). *COVID-19 & education impact report*. <https://mscenterforjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/COVID-19-Education-Impact-Report-2023.pdf>; Clarida, K., Bradford, L., & dubose, d. (In Press). *Science as a civil rights issue: A report on access and accountability across the South*.

South — particularly for students with the most limited opportunities to learn. If recent trends continue, policymakers and education leaders in the South run the risk of severely limiting economic opportunity and diminishing the region’s influence — a particular concern given that this region serves more K-12 students than any other.

Education and the Workforce: An Ongoing Economic Cycle

One of the primary implications of the Social Determinants of Education framework is that students’ access to resources outside of education — including neighborhood resourcing, housing, health, and community workforce — affect their opportunities for educational success in multiple ways. Neighborhood and community resourcing are directly linked to school resourcing because of the ways schools are funded through local tax revenue (this topic is addressed in more detail in Chapter III, in the section on school funding). Beyond that direct relationship, a student’s home, neighborhood, and community resources can also affect their ability to participate fully in educational opportunities.³⁰ This report outlines these links in greater detail below, but as a few very basic examples: A student who leaves home hungry likely arrives at school hungry as well; students experiencing housing instability may struggle to find places to study and do homework; and students in families and communities with limited workforce access may need to contribute to child care or work themselves during time that other students may be able to use for tutoring or extra practice.

This points to a major challenge evident in the data discussed in this chapter: Economic disparities create limits to students’ educational opportunities that can affect their educational outcomes, but data show that

educational outcomes are also linked to economic opportunity. In other words, without external supports to affect the process, students who come from families and communities with fewer socioeconomic resources would be expected to have less access to educational opportunity, and students with less access to educational opportunity would be expected to end up with more limited socioeconomic (and workforce) opportunities. Beyond the concerns this raises for those students, this is an extremely concerning result for the U.S. economy more broadly because it is evidence of the challenge already highlighted in the data: Present economic disparities threaten to further shrink the pool of students who can fill our national workforce needs, even as we risk major economic harms if that pool does not grow.

The remainder of this section further explores what data show regarding the links between wealth and income, educational outcomes, and workforce access.



³⁰ It is important to note here that this point refers specifically to tangible resources that are directly linked to economics, like medical care or school textbooks. Many argue based on substantial evidence that lower-income communities in fact have a huge number of resources that are simply not privileged in the education system — high levels of shared knowledge, effective ways of interpreting the world, cultural resources, and the like. In the US education system, which is largely modeled on middle- and upper-class White cultural norms, this shared community knowledge can not only not be privileged, but can be actively punished. For more on this, see Altman, M. (2024). *Miles to go: The state of education for Black students in America*. Southern Education Foundation. <https://southerneducation.org/what-we-do/milestogo2024/>

Employment, Degree Attainment, and Wages

Disparities in pay by level of education were high before the pandemic and have continued to grow. In 2023, the median weekly earnings for an individual with a bachelor’s degree were \$1,493. This was \$435 (more than 41%) greater than the \$1,058 for those with an associate degree, \$594 (66%) more than the \$899 for those with a high school diploma and no college experience, and \$785 more than for those without a diploma — 111% more. Two individuals without high school diplomas making the national median income would make less combined than *one* individual with a bachelor’s degree doing so.

The unemployment rate for those without a high school diploma was also more than 2.5 times the rate for those with a bachelor’s degree, 3.5 times the rate for those with doctoral degrees, and nearly five times the rate for those with a professional degree (e.g., M.D., J.D., MSW).³¹

2023 median earnings and unemployment rates based on degree level

Degree	Median 2023 weekly earnings	2023 unemployment rate
Professional	\$2,206	1.2%
Doctoral	\$2,109	1.6%
Master’s	\$1,737	2.0%
Bachelor’s	\$1,493	2.2%
All workers	\$1,170	3.0%
Associate	\$1,058	2.7%
Some college	\$992	3.3%
High school diploma	\$899	3.9%
Less than HS diploma	\$708	5.6%

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025

At the time of the publication of this report, inflation and other cost-of-living challenges affecting a broad swath of Americans are a common concern. These data clearly show that limits to educational opportunity have very serious financial outcomes that can prevent individuals from participating fully in the economy.

Wealth, Economic Mobility, and Opportunity

While schools are often framed as a “great equalizer,” giving all students access to educational opportunity regardless of their family’s income or their social status, research shows this is rarely the case in reality. In fact, family income is one of the most reliable predictors of educational and career outcomes for young people.³² Children who grow up in low-income households are less likely to graduate from high school and less likely to attend college than children from higher-income households.³³ The above data show that the median income for adults without college degrees is substantially lower than for those with college degrees, and that the median income for adults without high school diplomas is substantially lower than for those with high school diplomas. In other words, although we often view education as an opportunity to transcend economic disparities, these data suggest that the current system may reproduce them — students from low-income families are less likely to acquire high school and college degrees, and adults without high school or college degrees have a far lower median income than those with degrees.

Further, while the *income* disparities shown above are wide, another often even more impactful financial characteristic is *wealth*, defined as the sum of a family’s (or individual’s) assets minus all debts. Wealth has a powerful association with social determinants of education and economic mobility because of its function as a resource and a safety net that can help insulate families from job

31 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2025). *Earnings and unemployment rates by educational attainment, 2024*. Retrieved March 1, 2026 from <https://www.bls.gov/emp/chart-unemployment-earnings-education.htm>

32 Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. (2019). *Born to win, schooled to lose: Why equally talented students don't get equal chances to be all they can be*. <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/schooled2lose/>

33 Taylor, K. (2019, July 25). *Poverty's long-lasting effects on students' education and success*. Retrieved June 16, 2022 from <https://www.insightintodiversity.com/povertys-long-lasting-effects-on-students-education-and-success/>

losses, medical expenses, or other financial shocks.³⁴ Even in the early part of the pandemic, when there were substantial limitations to the data that were available, it was clear that the wealth gap was causing educational disparities to widen,³⁵ and post-pandemic research in the South has clearly shown the impact of district/ community wealth, in addition to that of personal wealth, in increasing educational inequity.³⁶

The cyclical pattern seen with income disparities and education disparities is also seen in the case of wealth: Just as wealth disparities influence education disparities, so are lower education levels associated with lower wealth.³⁷ One 2015 study found that among families headed by someone at least 40 years old, those whose head possessed a two- or four-year college degree had a total median family income 3.4 times that of families whose head did not possess a college degree — but that those families' wealth was more than seven times as great.³⁸ Further, even though possession of a college degree increases expected earnings, it does not afford everyone the opportunity to build wealth, raising serious questions about the ability of the postsecondary system to function as a gateway to greater financial stability.³⁹ For example, a Black household headed by a college graduate has less wealth on average than a White

household headed by someone without a college degree. This lower level of return experienced by Black degree-holders can be attributed to factors like higher student loan debt, discrimination in home appraisals and mortgage rates that limit real estate wealth, and the need to financially support extended family.⁴⁰ Research finds that wealth gaps have grown more rapidly than income gaps, and that by the start of 2020, at the dawn of the pandemic, household wealth had not even recovered from the Great Recession more than a decade earlier.⁴¹ Data now suggest the pandemic has compounded this issue.

Research shows that families with more wealth are also more likely to access high-quality early care and education programs,⁴² along with extra academic supports and enrichment opportunities that can help students thrive.⁴³ Children in wealthier families are also more likely to graduate from high school, enroll in and complete postsecondary education, and attend more expensive institutions that connect them to higher-paying jobs.⁴⁴ Low levels of family wealth can affect children's classroom performance⁴⁵ and are associated with increased levels of homelessness, higher infant mortality rates, worse health outcomes, and even earlier death.⁴⁶

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- 34 Braga, B., McKernan, S., Ratcliffe, C., & Baum, S. (2017). *Wealth inequality is a barrier to education and social mobility*. Urban Institute. https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/89976/wealth_and_education_4.pdf
- 35 Francis, D. & Weller, C. (2020, August 12). *The Black-White wealth gap will widen educational disparities during the Coronavirus pandemic*. Center for American Progress. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/black-white-wealth-gap-will-widen-educational-disparities-coronavirus-pandemic/>
- 36 E.g., Mississippi Center for Justice. (2022). *COVID-19 & education impact report*. <https://mscenterforjustice.org/covid19educationimpactreport/>
- 37 Wolla, S. & Sullivan, J. (2017, January 3). *Education, income, and wealth*. Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. <https://www.stlouisfed.org/publications/page-one-economics/2017/01/03/education-income-and-wealth>
- 38 Boshara, R., Emmons, W. R., & Noeth, B. J. (2015). The demographics of wealth-how age, education and race separate thrivers from strugglers in today's economy. Essay no. 2: the role of education. *Demographics of Wealth*, (2), 1-28.
- 39 Kindred Futures. (2025). *Roots of wealth: Unearthing Black prosperity in the South*. <https://kindredfutures.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/RootsofWealth-R4.pdf>
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Horowitz, J.M., Igielnik, R., & Kochhar, R. (2020, January 9). *Most Americans say there is too much economic inequality in the U.S., but fewer than half call it a top priority*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/01/09/trends-in-income-and-wealth-inequality/>
- 42 Long, H. (2017, September 26). *By age 3, inequality is clear: Rich kids attend school. Poor kids stay with a grandparent*. Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2017/09/26/by-age-3-inequality-is-clear-rich-kids-attend-school-poor-kids-stay-with-a-grandparent/>
- 43 Miller, P., Podvysotska, T., Betancur, L., & Votruba-Drzal, E. (2021). Wealth and child development: Differences in associations by family income and developmental stage. *Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, 7(3), 154-174. <https://doi.org/10.7758/RSF.2021.7.3.07>
- 44 Cooper, P. (2022, January 21). *Study: Most student debt belongs to high-wealth households*. Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/prestoncooper2/2022/01/21/study-most-student-debt-belongs-to-high-wealth-households/?sh=19dc1d143ba4>
- 45 Crowe, M. (2022). *Economic vitality and education in the South, part I: The South's pre-pandemic position*. Southern Education Foundation. <https://southerneducation.org/publications/economic-vitality-and-education-in-the-south-part-i-the-souths-pre-pandemic-position/>
- 46 Woolf, S., Aron, L., Dubay, L., Simon, S., Zimmerman, E., & Luk, K. (2015). *How are income and wealth linked to health and longevity?* Urban Institute. <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/49116/2000178-How-are-Income-and-Wealth-Linked-to-Health-and-Longevity.pdf>

Research also finds wealth gaps between Americans with and without disabilities. Households headed or co-headed by someone with a disability had mean and median wealth between one-third and one-half less than other households.⁴⁷ Further, there are enormous wealth disparities by race,⁴⁸ and **these disparities cost states and the nation money**. These racial disparities were already notable even before the pandemic: The Federal Reserve found in 2020 that the average White family had *five times* the wealth of the average Hispanic family — greater than the wealth disparity between families headed by someone with a college degree and those headed by someone with a high school diploma — and *eight times* the wealth of the average Black family — greater than the wealth disparity between families headed by someone with a college degree and those headed by someone with no high school diploma at all.⁴⁹ Among families with children, these differences become almost unthinkable — a 2016 study found that Black households with children had *one cent* of median wealth for every *dollar* of median wealth held by non-Hispanic White households with children — in other words, White households with children have *one hundred times* the wealth of Black households with children.⁵⁰

These gaps also profoundly hurt state economies. Analysis by the National Equity Atlas projects that eliminating racial wealth gaps would increase the GDP in every Southern state — from a 2% increase in

West Virginia to a 30% increase in Texas⁵¹ — and that eliminating racial wealth gaps nationwide would have increased the 2022 U.S. GDP by \$3.5 trillion. That amount is not only more than the federal government spent in total on public education that year,⁵² but more than the entirety of 2022 education expenditures among all educational institutions, employers, states, the military, and federal grant programs *combined*.⁵³

Projected increase to state GDP if racial income gaps were addressed

State	Percent increase
AL	12%
AR	8%
DE	10%
FL	18%
GA	18%
KY	3%
LA	19%
MD	17%
MS	19%
MO	5%
NC	14%
OK	10%
SC	14%
TN	7%
TX	30%
VA	12%
WV	2%
Average GDP increase	13%

Source: National Equity Atlas

47 Schur, L., Wang, J., Kruse, D., & Kato, T. (2024). Disabilities, shared capitalism, and wealth: evidence from health and retirement survey. *International Review of Applied Economics*, 39(4–5), 617–633. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02692171.2024.2384450>

48 While this report focuses on the current effects of wealth disparities for outcomes today, prior SEF reports have addressed the history and development of this racial wealth gap. For more context on how redlining and discriminatory practices in federal policy, real estate, banking, and other areas created the enormous racial wealth gap we see today — see, e.g., Crowe, M. (2022). *Economic vitality and education in the South, part I: The South's pre-pandemic position*. Southern Education Foundation. <https://southerneducation.org/publications/economic-vitality-and-education-in-the-south-part-i-the-souths-pre-pandemic-position/>

49 Bhutta, N., Chang, A.C., Dettling, L.J., & Hsu, J.W. (2020). *Disparities in wealth by race and ethnicity in the 2019 Survey of Consumer Finances*. Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System. <https://doi.org/10.17016/2380-7172.2797>

50 Percheski, C. & Gibson-Davis, C. (2020). A penny on the dollar: Racial inequities in wealth among households with children. *Socius: Sociological research for a dynamic world*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023120916616>

51 National Equity Atlas. (n.d.) *Racial equity in income: Eliminating racial inequities in income would strengthen families, communities, and local economies*. <https://nationalequityatlas.org/indicators/Racial-equity-in-income>

52 U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.) *Fiscal Year 2022 budget summary*. Retrieved March 1, 2026 from <https://www.ed.gov/sites/ed/files/about/overview/budget/budget22/summary/22summary.pdf>

53 Credential Engine. (2022). *Education and training expenditures in the U.S.* <https://credentialengine.org/resources/education-and-training-expenditures-in-the-u-s-2022-report/>

A 2024 study by Citi Global Perspectives and Solutions also suggests that the U.S. economy lost up to \$3.9 trillion between 2020 and 2024 because of racial gaps in wages, business ownership, and homeownership.⁵⁴ A 2020 report from the same source had estimated that the economic cost of racial inequality in the U.S. had been \$16 trillion between 2000 and 2020, while the wage gap alone accounted for \$12 trillion.⁵⁵

Looking Ahead: Disrupting the Cycle

The data described here are clear: Without intervention, income and wealth inequality create educational disparities, and educational disparities create further income and wealth inequality — which hurts the economy at both the state and national level. Further, this inequality affects resourcing not only in education, but in key areas reflected in the Social Determinants of Education framework that are interconnected with students' opportunities for educational success. If this cycle continues and educational access and opportunity do not increase, our ability to meet the workforce needs projected by the BLS over the next decade may increasingly be in question.

Addressing the effects of economic inequality is very difficult, but *research shows that increasing educational resources and opportunity for students and families can help*. Students from low-income families attending schools serving low-income communities have lower average standardized test scores than students from higher-income families attending schools serving higher-income communities; however, when students from low-income families attend public schools serving higher-income families,⁵⁶ *they perform better on average*.⁵⁷ In fact, some research has found that the social composition across a student's school is a better predictor of educational outcomes for that student than the income of their own family.⁵⁸ In large part, this is again a matter of resources: Schools serving higher concentrations of students in poverty on average have more crowded classrooms, lower-quality facilities, and fewer overall educational resources,⁵⁹ as well as fewer experienced and highly credentialed teachers⁶⁰ and often more limited access to advanced and college preparatory courses.⁶¹

Despite this evidence, a 2022 EdTrust analysis found that high-poverty school districts across the nation received 5% less in state and local funding on average — or

54 Citi GPS. (2024). *Closing the racial wealth gap: Restating the economic case*. <https://www.citigroup.com/rcs/citigpa/storage/public/Closing-the-Racial-Wealth-Gap-Restating-the-Economic-Case.pdf>

55 Citi GPS. (2020). *Closing the racial inequality gaps*. <https://www.citigroup.com/global/insights/closing-the-racial-inequality-gaps-20200922>

56 Opportunity can be further expanded for all students through the implementation of programs that increase access at the between-school and within-school level to avoid the consolidation of opportunity only among some students (such as the automatic enrollment of students in advanced coursework – see: EdTrust. (2024). *Automatic enrollment policies for advanced coursework*. <https://edtrust.org/rti/automatic-enrollment-policies-for-advanced-coursework/>)

57 Note that this is a question of equitable public school resourcing, when comparing public schools to one another. This is not a comparison of public and private schools — in fact, a recent analysis of available data on every voucher program in the South found that zero of the fifteen states with voucher programs were able to produce data showing that the students participating in those programs on average achieved results above the state public school average after transferring from public schools to voucher-supported tuition at private schools. (see: Hoang, T.R., Jones, F., Burns, D., & Altman, M. (2025). *Here is the truth: School vouchers just don't work*. Southern Education Foundation. <https://southerneducation.org/legislative-issues-in-the-south/school-vouchers-an-overview/>). Research strongly suggests that making public school resources more equitable across different localities and regions has many beneficial outcomes for students and for larger society; it also suggests that programs like school vouchers, tax credits, and education savings accounts, which take money away from public schools and push students into less-accountable private schools not held to the same student protection requirements, are harmful to the public education system and are not helpful for students.

58 Borman, G., & Dowling, M. (2010). Schools and inequality: A multilevel analysis of Coleman's equality of educational opportunity data. *Teachers College Record*, 112(5), 1201-1246. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016146811011200507>

59 Morgan, H. (2012). Poverty-stricken schools: What we can learn from the rest of the world and from successful schools in economically disadvantaged areas in the US. *Education*, 133(2), 291-297.

60 Oakes, J., Cookson, P., George, J., Levin, S., Carver-Thomas, D., Frelow, F., & Berry, B. (2021). *Adequate and equitable education in high-poverty schools: Barriers and opportunities in North Carolina*. Learning Policy Institute. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/leandro-high-poverty-schools-brief>

61 U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2018). *K-12 education: Public high schools with more students in poverty and smaller schools provide fewer academic offerings to prepare for college*. (GAO-19-8). Retrieved March 1, 2026 from <https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-19-8>

about \$800 less per student — than low-poverty districts (even though research consistently finds that the costs to educate students living in poverty are substantially *higher*).⁶² However, this does reflect a reduction from previous years: The same estimate in 2015 was 10%, or \$1,200 less per student,⁶³ while in 2018 it was 7%, or \$1,000 less per student.⁶⁴

In the South, gaps in resources and opportunity are further exacerbated by the substantially lower average per-student funding levels across the region than in other regions.⁶⁵ This leaves schools in the South that mainly serve lower-income families and communities with still fewer financial resources, compounding this cycle and further limiting educational opportunity for those students. This situation further limits the pool of Southern students with access to the career training and college degree programs they will need for the industries projected to grow in this decade, including key positions in health, engineering, science, and business. This has particular implications for Black students, as the South is home to well over half of all the Black ECE, K-12, and postsecondary students in the U.S.⁶⁶

Increasing educational access and opportunity is key to this issue. The next three chapters, on ECE, K-12, and postsecondary education, highlight the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on current access and opportunity and future outcome projections in these areas.



62 Morgan, I. (2022). *Equal Is not good enough: An analysis of school funding equity across the US and within each state*. EdTrust. <https://edtrust.org/rti/equal-is-not-good-enough/>

63 Ushomirsky, N. & Williams, D. (2015). *Funding gaps 2015: Too many states still spend less on educating students who need the most*. EdTrust. https://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/FundingGaps2015_TheEducationTrust1.pdf

64 Morgan, I. & Amerikaner, A. (2018). *Funding gaps: An analysis of school funding equity across the U.S. and within each state*. EdTrust. https://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/FundingGapReport_2018_FINAL.pdf

65 For more on this, see: Altman, M. (2024). *Miles to go: The state of education for Black students in America*. Southern Education Foundation. <https://southerneducation.org/what-we-do/milestogo2024/>

66 Morris, J. E., & Monroe, C. R. (2009). Why study the US South? The nexus of race and place in investigating Black student achievement. *Educational Researcher*, 38(1), 21-36.; Altman, M. (2024) *Miles to go: The state of education for Black students in America*. Southern Education Foundation. <https://southerneducation.org/what-we-do/milestogo2024/>

II. EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION (ECE)

Data cited in the previous chapter highlight the cyclical nature of economic opportunity, educational opportunity, and workforce opportunity, and ways that income and wealth inequalities hurt the U.S. economy. The chapter also emphasizes post-pandemic projections that suggest that we may not be on track to produce the workforce needed to fill key positions and provide key services in the future without increasing educational access and ensuring that students have greater opportunity to succeed and to take on those roles. This and the following two chapters present data on opportunity and outcomes in ECE, K-12, and postsecondary education, respectively. Each outlines what we know about the current post-pandemic state of educational access in these areas, along with what is expected (or may be feared) based on current projections, and what may be possible if access and opportunity are increased for more students.

This chapter explores the state of early care and education in the post-COVID era. It highlights the significant one-time investments that were made because of the pandemic and the transformative impact that they had on improving program quality, access, and educator compensation, as well as the effect that the subsequent expiration of those funds has had on the sector. It concludes with a look at the potential of robust, long-term investments to increase access and preparation for our youngest learners and a consideration of the possible paths forward.

It's important to note that ECE acts as a dual determinant of education — not only improving future

academic and workforce outcomes for the young children who participate, but also providing a key support to parents and caregivers that allows them to pursue schooling or participate in the workforce.⁶⁷ Moreover, society as a whole has a stake in ECE, even for those without young children. Early learning programs act as a critical piece of infrastructure to sustain workforce participation — allowing medical professionals, first responders, teachers, and other essential workers who are also parents to do their jobs. In fact, recent analysis by Capita has found that parents of young children are significantly overrepresented in the critical fields of health care, construction, and protective services (i.e., police and fire).⁶⁸



67 Crowe, M. (2022). *Economic vitality and education in the South, part I: The South's pre-pandemic position*. Southern Education Foundation. <https://southerneducation.org/publications/economic-vitality-and-education-in-the-south-part-i-the-souths-pre-pandemic-position/>

68 Haspel, E. (2025, October 28). *Family policy and labor policy are inseparable — This data shows why*. Capita. <https://capita.org/parents-in-the-labor-force/>



Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS)

For parents who are also students themselves, access to child care can be a key determinant of educational success. Nearly 1 in 5 undergraduate students in the United States are parents, with half of those students having at least one child under the age of 6.⁶⁹ The majority of student parents are female (74%) and students of color (55%).⁷⁰ The added challenge of parenting while obtaining a degree means student parents often experience delayed and/or unstable pathways to degree attainment.⁷¹ Postsecondary institutions can and should provide supports that help ensure the immediate and long-term well-being and success of parenting students and their families.

One of the mechanisms through which postsecondary institutions can provide support to student parents is through the Child Care Access Means Parents in

School (CCAMPIS) program. CCAMPIS is a federal grant program that provides funds to colleges and universities to subsidize care for the children of low-income, Pell-eligible student parents.⁷² Funds may be used to expand on-campus child care options, offset the cost of care at an off-site location, or provide supplemental services such as financial counseling to parenting students.⁷³ A relatively small program, over \$80 million was distributed to 264 postsecondary institutions in 2023.⁷⁴ If scaled to reach more of the 3.1 million undergraduate student parents across the country,⁷⁵ CCAMPIS could have an even more transformational impact. An analysis by the Government Accountability Office for the 2016-17 school year estimated the persistence rate of CCAMPIS participants at 82%.⁷⁶

69 Anderson, T., Dunder, A., Gittens, S., Ryberg, R., Schreiber, R., Taylor, L., Warren, J., & Westaby, K. (2024, September 30). *Who are undergraduates with dependent children?* SPARK Collaborative. <https://studentparentaction.org/assets/r-file/Who-Are-Undergraduates-with-Dependent-Children.pdf>

70 Ibid.

71 Annie E. Casey Foundation (2025). *Supporting young parents in higher education*. <https://www.aecf.org/resources/supporting-young-parents-in-higher-education>

72 Edgerton, A. K. (2024, January 23). *Child Care Access Means Parents in School program. (CCAMPIS): In brief*. (CRS Report No. R47422). Retrieved March 1, 2026 from https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R47422#_Toc156900202

73 Islam, A., Green, A.R., & Anderson, T. (2022, December 30). *The Child Care Access Means Parents in School program (CCAMPIS)*. Urban Institute. <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/child-care-access-means-parents-school-program-ccampis>

74 U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.). *Child care access means parents in school program*. Retrieved March 1, 2026 from <https://www.ed.gov/grants-and-programs/grants-special-populations/grants-economically-disadvantaged-students/child-care-access-means-parents-school-program#home>

75 Yates, A.S. (2024, September 19). *Student-parent data: What we know, what we don't, and how to find out*. American Council on Education. <https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/Student-Parent-Data.pdf>

76 U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2019, August). *More information could help student parents access additional federal student aid*. (GAO-19-522). Retrieved March 1, 2026 from <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-19-522.pdf>

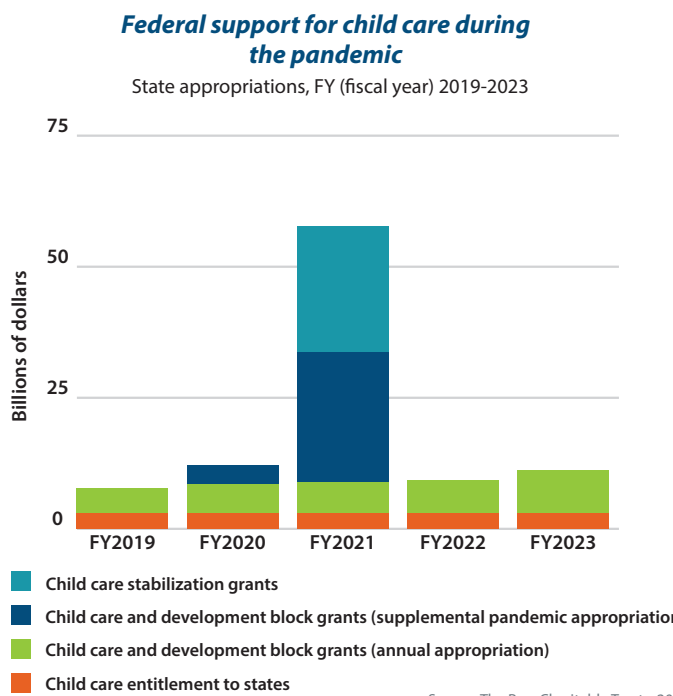
COVID’s Impact on the ECE Sector

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, despite strengths like dedicated educators and pockets of high-quality programs, the ECE sector was already in crisis. The cost of providing high-quality care and programming often exceeded what many families could afford, leading to financial strains on both providers and parents. The ECE workforce remained undervalued and underpaid. Reports from before the pandemic found that the nation’s child care crisis cost \$57 billion annually in lost earnings, productivity, and revenue.⁷⁷ The pandemic exacerbated these issues, adding pressure onto an already unstable system.

On the program side, many early learning centers faced operational challenges. Centers often operate on razor-thin margins — the U.S. Department of Treasury suggests that this margin is less than 1%⁷⁸ — balancing what families can afford to pay with the high costs of personnel (with teacher-to-child ratios as low as 1:4), building maintenance, and food and classroom materials.⁷⁹ During the pandemic, some families chose to keep their children at home for safety reasons or because parents were working from home. This created enrollment gaps and unpredictable attendance patterns, which in turn left programs without enough funding to continue operations.⁸⁰ Child Care Aware found that between December 2019 and March 2021, nearly 16,000 early learning centers and family child care programs were closed in the 37 states for which it had data.⁸¹ There was also a notable decrease in the number of children being served by early intervention programs during the pandemic, with 91% of respondents in a

survey by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicating that the pandemic had a high negative impact on the early identification of developmental delays and disabilities in young children.⁸²

Additionally, the sector faced immense staffing shortages as ECE professionals were laid off or lost their jobs in the early days of the pandemic.⁸³ A July 2021 survey found that 4 out of 5 centers were experiencing staffing shortages, and this rate was higher for minority-owned programs (83%) and programs serving families with child care subsidies (88%). The sector lost 370,000 jobs in the early months of the pandemic, and the number of jobs did not fully recover to pre-pandemic levels until the summer of 2023.⁸⁴



77 ReadyNation. (2019). *Want to grow the economy? Fix the child care crisis*. <https://www.strongnation.org/articles/780-want-to-grow-the-economy-fix-the-child-care-crisis>

78 U.S. Department of the Treasury. (2021, September). *The economics of child care supply in the United States*. Retrieved March 1, 2026 from <https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/136/The-Economics-of-Childcare-Supply-09-14-final.pdf>

79 Smith, L. K. & Osborn, C. (2024, March 1). *Top-down, bottom-up: Building a state child care center workforce*. Bipartisan Policy Center. Retrieved December 30, 2025 from <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/report/building-state-child-care-center-workforce/>

80 ICF. (n.d.) *The impact of Covid-19 on the child care sector: Themes from state reports*. U.S. Department of Labor. Retrieved February 19, 2025 from <https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/WB/ImpactCovidChildcareSector.pdf>

81 Child Care Aware of America. (2022). *Demanding change: Repairing our child care system*. <https://www.childcareaware.org/demanding-change-repairing-our-child-care-system/>

82 Center for Disease Control and Prevention. (n.d.) *Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on early identification of developmental delays and disabilities and opportunities for improvement*. Retrieved March 1, 2025 from <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/pdf/impact-covid-developdisabil-508.pdf>

83 Child Care Aware of America. (2022). *Demanding change: Repairing our child care system*. <https://www.childcareaware.org/demanding-change-repairing-our-child-care-system/>

84 Ibid.

COVID-19 Emergency Relief Funding

Billions in emergency relief funding helped sustain the early learning sector and had a transformational impact.⁸⁵ More than \$50 billion in federal funding was distributed to states between March 2020 and April 2021, primarily through the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG).⁸⁶ States used their funds in a variety of ways, including increasing access to child care subsidies and providing financial support to the ECE workforce.

Child care subsidies are a critical lifeline for working families who are unable to afford the full cost of care, but only 13% of eligible children are served under CCDBG.⁸⁷ Many states chose to target this issue by using relief funds to expand the number of families eligible for assistance by increasing the income threshold and, in some states, waiving the income requirement altogether for essential workers. In Georgia, for example, this equated to over 10,000 additional slots for the Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS) program.⁸⁸ States also often chose to waive family copayments and expand the provider reimbursement levels.

Another popular use of relief funds was providing financial support to the ECE workforce through one-time bonuses, ongoing stipends, wage increases, and other measures. For example, the Alabama Department of Human Resources used relief funding to provide quarterly bonuses to eligible ECE staff.⁸⁹ Overall, supplemental funding as of May 2023 was distributed

to more than 200,000 providers serving up to 10 million children. The cost of care was lowered for more than 700,000 children, and an additional 300,000 early learning slots were created. More than 650,000 ECE workers saw increased compensation.⁹⁰ This investment was part of a broader policy response that cut child poverty in half between 2020 and 2021, offering a rare glimpse at what is possible with sustained, family-centered action.⁹¹



85 Funds were distributed through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSA), and the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act

86 First Five Years Fund. (n.d.) *COVID-19 child care relief funding: timeline and deadlines*. https://www.ffyf.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/COVID-Relief-Calendar_4-29-21.pdf

87 First Five Years Fund. (2024, July 16). *2024 child care and early learning in the United States*. <https://www.ffyf.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/2024-National-Fact-Sheet.pdf>

88 Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (2024, April). *DECAL's federal COVID-19 relief funding spending summary*. <https://www.dec.al.gov/documents/attachments/DECALCRRSAandARPSpendingPlan.pdf>

89 Binkley, D. (2021, November 22). *Alabama DHR announces grants for stabilizing child care workforce*. Alabama Department of Human Resources. <https://dhr.alabama.gov/alabama-dhr-announces-grants-for-stabilizing-child-care-workforce/>

90 Administration for Children and Families Office of Child Care. (2023, May 25). *COVID investments in child care*. Retrieved March 1, 2025 from <https://acf.gov/occ/infographic/covid-investments-child-care-supporting-children-families-and-providers>

91 Burns, K., Fox, L., & Wilson, D. (2022, September 13). *Expansions to Child Tax Credit contributed to 46% decline in child poverty since 2020*. United States Census Bureau. Retrieved March 1, 2025 from <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2022/09/record-drop-in-child-poverty.html>

Expiration of Relief Funds

Much of the federal relief funding expired in September 2023, leaving massive fiscal cliffs for early care and education providers. A survey conducted in October 2023 by the RAPID Survey Project reported that 1 in 4 providers that ran out of stabilization funding were serving fewer children, and 35% of providers reported having to increase tuition, which disproportionately impacted families of color (38% of Black families and 34% of Latino families surveyed faced tuition increases, compared to 28% of White families).⁹²

In the workforce, 28% of providers that ran out of funding reported an inability to sustain salary increases or the need to cut wages. Thirteen percent of providers reported reducing staff benefits.⁹³

State agencies have also often been left with no choice but to reverse the expansions made under relief funding. For example, since federal relief funding expired, the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning has worked to reduce the number of children served through its CAPS program from a high of 73,000 children in 2023 back to pre-pandemic levels of 50,000.⁹⁴

Some states increased ECE funding in their budgets to reduce the gap left by the expiration of federal stabilization funds. In 2023, Louisiana appropriated its largest amount to the state's child care subsidy program in more than a decade, at \$52 million.⁹⁵ North Carolina allocated an additional \$67.5 million in one-time funding in 2024 to mitigate the effects of the funding cliff.⁹⁶ But these investments are not enough to solve

the myriad financial challenges faced by the sector. The national average cost of child care in 2023 jumped to \$11,582 from \$9,687 before the pandemic in 2019.⁹⁷



92 National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2023, November). *Going over the child care cliff*. https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/nov_survey_brief.pdf

93 Ibid.

94 Georgia Senate Budget and Evaluation Office. (2025). *HB 67 (FY 2025A) - Education \ Higher Education*. [95 Child Care Aware of America. \(2023, September 14\). *State session round up: Summer 2023*. <https://info.childcareaware.org/blog/state-session-round-up-summer-2023>](https://www.legis.ga.gov/api/document/docs/default-source/senate-budget-office-document-library/appropriations/2025/amended/afy2025_house_education_and_higher_education.pdf?sfvrsn=73a36215_2; Floyd, I. (2026) Overview: 2026 fiscal year budget for the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning. Georgia Budget and Policy Institute.</p></div><div data-bbox=)

96 North Carolina Office of the Governor. (2024, September 18). *Gov. Cooper warns of impending early childhood education and child care crisis as stop gap funding falls short* [Press release]. <https://governor.nc.gov/news/press-releases/2024/09/18/gov-cooper-warns-impending-early-childhood-education-and-child-care-crisis-stop-gap-funding-falls>

97 Child Care Aware of America. (2023). *Child care at a standstill: Price and landscape analysis*. <https://www.childcareaware.org/thechildcarestandstill/#PriceofCare>



Dedicated Funding Streams for Early Care and Education

When federal funding lapses or is insufficient, states can step in to ensure more stable funding for early care and education. One way to ensure that funding is specifically allocated to ECE and is sustainable in the long term is through dedicated public funding streams. Dedicated funding streams are not subject to the appropriations process and are thus more stable than a budget line item. Revenue can be generated in various ways, including through additional sales taxes, taxes on activities like the lottery and sports betting, or taxes on income and assets. Additionally, some states are able to draw from state land trusts or budget surpluses, establishing a trust fund and investing a portion of it to generate revenue through interest.⁹⁸

As one example, the Louisiana Early Childhood Education Fund is made up of revenue from sports betting, casinos, specialty license plates, and CBD sales. The fund provides a dollar-for-dollar match to local entities that create their own funding mechanisms,

like New Orleans, which passed a local property tax in 2022 to support ECE.⁹⁹

Additionally, in 2020, New Mexico created an endowment fund, the Early Childhood Education and Care Fund, with a one-time appropriation of \$300 million. In 2022, voters then approved a constitutional amendment to annually draw down funds from the state's Land Grant Permanent Fund to support early care and education. As of November 1, 2025, New Mexico is now guaranteeing free care to every child across the state regardless of income, the first and currently only state to do so.¹⁰⁰

Twenty-two states have one or more funding streams dedicated to children's services like child care, pre-K, and afterschool programs.¹⁰¹ By further leveraging dedicated funding streams, many more states in the South and nation can increase child care access for more — or even all — children.

98 Showers, B., Gee, L.C., Allen, O., Weinstock, J., & Mendoza, M. (2025). *State strategies for sustained investment in kids: A landscape of dedicated funding*. Children's Funding Project. https://childrensfundingproject.org/wp-content/uploads/State-Dedicated-Funds_FINAL.pdf

99 Children's Funding Project. (2022) *New Orleans, LA's early childhood education millage*. https://childrensfundingproject.org/wp-content/uploads/New-Orleans-case-study_FINAL.pdf

100 Showers, B., Gee, L.C., Allen, O., Weinstock, J., & Mendoza, M. (2025). *State strategies for sustained investment in kids: A landscape of dedicated funding*. Children's Funding Project. https://childrensfundingproject.org/wp-content/uploads/State-Dedicated-Funds_FINAL.pdf

101 Ibid.

Looking Ahead: Institutionalizing ECE for All

Pandemic-era reforms were a rare and powerful case study of bold investments that reflect the lived experiences of families and early learning providers. Research is clear about the long-term outcomes of participation in high-quality early learning environments. Longitudinal studies show transformational effects not only for children who attend these programs, but even for *their* future children.¹⁰²

In one such study on low-income Black children known as the Perry Preschool Study, researchers found that by age 40, participants were more likely than nonparticipants to have graduated from high school, have a job, and earn higher wages. Their children also saw higher levels of employment, education, and health, and decreased levels of crime and school suspensions.¹⁰³ Advancing comprehensive access to early learning across the nation could lift generations of young children out of poverty *and* save the country money in

the long run. High-quality birth-through-age-5 learning environments can provide a return on investment of 13% in future education and health outcomes. Children's participation in high-quality programs can also increase parental income by enabling greater participation in the workforce.¹⁰⁴

The current piecemeal approach to early care and education is expensive in the short term and harmful to families and the economy in the long term. A 2026 study by Ready Nation found that the infant-toddler care crisis costs the United States \$172 billion yearly in lost earnings, productivity, and revenue,¹⁰⁵ up from \$122 billion in 2023¹⁰⁶ and \$57 billion in 2018.¹⁰⁷ State-level studies have placed the annual losses from the lack of affordable, high-quality ECE at \$865 million in Arkansas, \$5.38 billion in Florida, \$1.35 billion in Missouri, \$9.39 billion in Texas,¹⁰⁸ and \$2.52 billion in Georgia.¹⁰⁹ Beyond the economic cost and the need to sustain today's workforce, high-quality ECE for more students would provide an opportunity to break cycles of poverty, improve K-12 learning outcomes, and cultivate the future workforce.

102 Conti, G., Heckman, J., & Pinto, R. (2016). *The effects of two influential early childhood interventions on health and health behaviour*. *Economic journal* (London, England), 126(596), F28–F65. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ecoj.12420>

103 Schweinhart, L.J. (2005). *The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study through age 40*. High/Scope Educational Research Foundation. <https://highscope.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/perry-preschool-summary-40.pdf>; Garcia, J.L., Heckman, J.J., & Ronda, V. (2021). *Boosting intergenerational mobility: The lasting effects of early childhood education on skills and social mobility*. Center for the Economics of Human Development, The University of Chicago. https://heckmanequation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/F_Heckman_Perry-2021_OnePager_092321.pdf

104 García, J.L., Heckman, J.J., Leaf, D.E. & Prados, M.J. (2017) *Quantifying the life-cycle benefits of a prototypical early childhood program*. NBER Working Paper 23479. <https://doi.org/10.3386/w23479>

105 ReadyNation. (2026). *The child care crisis costs the U.S. economy \$172 billion each year*. Institute for Child Success. <https://www.instituteforchildsuccess.org/resources/resource/cost-child-care-crisis-report/>

106 ReadyNation. (2023). *\$122 billion: The growing, annual cost of the infant-toddler child care crisis*. <https://www.strongnation.org/articles/2038-122-billion-the-growing-annual-cost-of-the-infant-toddler-child-care-crisis>

107 ReadyNation. (2019). *Want to grow the economy? Fix the child care crisis*. <https://www.strongnation.org/articles/780-want-to-grow-the-economy-fix-the-child-care-crisis>

108 U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation. (2023). *Untapped potential report: Arkansas*. <https://www.uschamberfoundation.org/education/untapped-potential-arkansas>; U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation. (2023). *Untapped potential report: Florida*. <https://www.uschamberfoundation.org/education/untapped-potential-florida>; U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation. (2023). *Untapped potential report: Missouri*. <https://www.uschamberfoundation.org/education/untapped-potential-missouri>; U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation. (2023). *Untapped potential report: Texas*. <https://www.uschamberfoundation.org/education/untapped-potential-report-texas>

109 Goldberg, H. & Cairl, T. (2025, March). *For lack of care: The economic impact of child care challenges*. Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students. <https://gears.org/wp-content/uploads/Opps-Lost-3.0.pdf>

The U.S. military provides accessible child care for their service members and could serve as a model for a nationwide approach to child care. The U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) spends approximately \$1.2 billion each year and employs over 23,000 early learning staff to provide or supplement child care for around 200,000 children of military personnel.¹¹⁰ They do this in a variety of ways:

1. **Child Development Centers (CDCs):** Centers with strict accreditation standards operated by DoD that serve children ages 6 weeks to 5 years old.
2. **Family Child Care:** Home based, licensed care for children ages 4 weeks to 5 years old. Located on base and overseen by DoD.
3. **School-age Care:** Facility or home-based care for children ages 6-12 who require supervision outside of school hours.
4. **Supplemental Child Care:** Assistance provided to families to access care outside of DoD operated sites. This can include fee assistance and resource and referral services.

Statute requires that CDCs also establish a board made up of parents to organize meetings with staff and coordinate parent participation programs.¹¹¹ Additionally, some centers offer 24/7 care, a critical lifeline for caregivers who work nontraditional hours.¹¹²

Families pay for a portion of the cost of care using a sliding scale that is based on total family income. For example, while the average cost of care for a non-school-age child is \$1,094 per month,¹¹³ a family receiving care through the U.S. Army pays a monthly rate between \$235 (yearly income below \$45,000) and \$934 (yearly income above \$160,000).¹¹⁴ The military subsidizes these expenses for service members as an essential step in enabling them to do their jobs. This same level of urgency is needed for the families that help fuel our nation's economy.



110 Kamarck, K.N. (2020, March 19). *Military child development program: Background and issues*. (CRS Report No. R45288). Retrieved March 1, 2025 from <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R45288>

111 Ibid.

112 Militarychildcare.com. (n.d.) *Military operated child care programs*. <https://public.militarychildcare.csd.disa.mil/mcc-central/mcchome/military-operated-child-care-programs>

113 Child Care Aware of America. (2024). *Child care in America: 2024 price and supply*. <https://www.childcareaware.org/price-landscape24/#PriceofCare>

114 Militarychildcare.com. (n.d.) *Military Child Care in Your Neighborhood (MCCYN)*. <https://public.militarychildcare.csd.disa.mil/mcc-central/mcchome/mccyn/army>

III. K-12 EDUCATION

By the time they reach kindergarten, students already bring a wide range of experiences, knowledge, and ways of interpreting and understanding the world. The K-12 system has great potential to draw on what all of these students bring with them to support them in achieving successful outcomes, but data show large disparities in the opportunities students have to do this. These disparities are particularly salient for students of color and students from low-income families.

Disparities in opportunities — or opportunity gaps¹¹⁵ — surface in students' differential access to things like adequately funded schools; high-quality, rigorous, and accurate curriculum; and effective postsecondary preparation. They also surface in the educational climate students experience and the ability of their schools to serve as welcoming spaces that provide supports that align with the social determinants of education. The pandemic substantially reduced attendance and graduation rates, raised further challenges for a school funding system that was already very inequitable, and created extreme challenges to health and well-being that continue to demand coordinated effort to address.¹¹⁶ Pandemic-era school closures wreaked havoc on students' ability to participate fully in educational opportunity, and the growing digital divide — discussed in more detail in Chapter VI, which focuses specifically on technology and digital access — caused these closures to have greater effects on some students than on others in ways that have not yet been remedied and are still being fully understood.



This chapter begins with an overview of the pandemic's broad impact on current and expected K-12 enrollments, and expectations and trends around school attendance and high school graduation that have implications for student postsecondary opportunities at a national and regional level. It then addresses opportunity at the school and district levels through issues of funding, including the COVID funding cliff, that hold further implications for which students in which schools have greater or more limited opportunities for educational success. Following this, students' experiences within K-12 schools are examined, including their access to rigorous and high-quality learning opportunities, accurate curriculum, and finally adequate postsecondary preparation, as the report moves into a full consideration of postsecondary opportunity in the next chapter.

115 E.g., Milner, H. R. (2010). *Start where you are, but don't stay there: Understanding diversity, opportunity gaps, and teaching in today's classrooms*. Cambridge: Harvard Education Press.; Altman, M. (2024). *Miles to go: The state of education for Black students in America*. Southern Education Foundation. <https://southerneducation.org/what-we-do/milestogo2024/>

116 This chapter addresses how these challenges affect students, while Chapter V addresses their effects on teachers and the teacher workforce.

Changes and Projections in K-12 School Enrollment Nationally and in the South

Between 2018 and 2019, public K-12 student enrollment increased slightly, from 50.7 million to 50.8 million, before falling in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic by more than a million students, to 49.4 million in fall 2020. This was a single-year drop of nearly 3% and the lowest enrollment since the first decade of the 21st century.¹¹⁷ As of fall 2023, K-12 enrollment stood at 49.5 million, down 2.5% from the 2019 peak.¹¹⁸ This stands in contrast to a pre-pandemic National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) projection from December 2019 that 50.8 million students would be enrolled in public K-12 schools by 2023.¹¹⁹

In those 2019 predictive data, NCES anticipated more than 51 million students in public K-12 schools by 2029. In its latest projections in December 2023, estimated enrollment in 2029 would be 47 million,¹²⁰ 8% and 4 million less than the 2019 estimate.

The decline in public school enrollment has been less severe in the South. Compared to the 2.5% decrease nationwide, enrollment in the South was down less than 1% between fall 2019 and fall 2023, declining from 20 million in 2019 to just under 19.9 million.¹²¹ This means that during the pandemic, the percentage of U.S. students attending public school in the South grew, exceeding 40% by 2023.

2019 Predicted enrollment compared with actual (pre-2023) and revised-prediction (2023 and later) post-pandemic enrollment

Year	2019 predicted enrollments (in millions)	2023 revised
2020	50.7	49.4
2021	50.6	49.4
2022	50.7	49.6
2023	50.8	49.5
2024	50.8	49.4
2025	50.7	48.2
2026	50.6	47.6
2027	50.7	47.4
2028	50.9	47.2
2029	51.1	47.0

Actual

Predicted

Source: NCES, 2019, 2023, 2026

Share of U.S. public K-12 students attending school in the south, 1990-2023

Year	Percentage of total U.S. public K-12 students attending school in the South
1990	35.9%
2000	36.0%
2011	38.3%
2014	38.8%
2017	39.1%
2020	39.5%
2023	40.1%

Source: NCES, 2026

117 NCES. (2024). *Enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools, by region, state, and jurisdiction: Selected years, fall 1990 through fall 2023*. Retrieved March 1, 2025 from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d24/tables/dt24_203.20.asp?current=yes

118 Ibid.

119 NCES. (2023). *Enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools, by level and grade: Selected years, fall 1980 through fall 2031*. Retrieved March 1, 2025 from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23_203.10.asp?current=yes; NCES. (2026). *Enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools, by level and grade: Selected years, fall 1980 through fall 2024*. Retrieved June 1, 2026 from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d25/tables/dt25_203.10.asp

120 NCES. (2023). *Enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools, by level and grade: Selected years, fall 1980 through fall 2031*. Retrieved March 1, 2025 from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23_203.10.asp?current=yes; NCES. (2026). *Enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools, by level and grade: Selected years, fall 1980 through fall 2024*. Retrieved June 1, 2026 from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d25/tables/dt25_203.10.asp

121 NCES. (2026). *Enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools, by region, state, and jurisdiction: Selected years, fall 1990 through fall 2024*. Retrieved June 1, 2026 from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d25/tables/dt25_203.20.asp. Note that these numbers are for the Census South region, which includes Washington, D.C., and does not include Missouri.

The South was also the only census region in which enrollment increased from 2013 to 2023. In that 10-year span, public K-12 enrollment dropped by 4.5% in the Northeast, 4.1% in the Midwest, 2.5% in the West, and 1.1% nationally, but grew by 2.9% in the South. This trend only increases the importance of ensuring that schools in the Southern region can provide the necessary supports to meet the needs of their growing share of students.¹²²

Change in enrollment by U.S. region, 2013-2023

U.S. region	Percent enrollment change 2013-2023
Northeast	-4.5%
Midwest	-4.1%
West	-2.5%
South	+2.9%
U.S. average	-1.1%

Source: NCES, 2026

The number of high-poverty school districts in the South also increased. In 2018-19, 32% of districts in the South were in the top quartile for the percentages of families living below the poverty rate.¹²³ By 2020-21, 34% of districts in the South were in the same low-income quartile.¹²⁴ In both instances, the South had the highest rate of any U.S. region: In 2020-21, 29.4% of districts in the Northeast were in the top quartile, 19.1% of districts in the Midwest, and 12.6% of districts in the West. Further, poverty affects students in the South very differently by race and geography — 46.6% of Black students in the South are in the top quartile for district poverty rates, along with 47.2% of American Indian/

Alaska Native (AIAN) students and 38.3% of Hispanic students, but the numbers are much lower for White students and Pacific Islander students, at 26.4% and 27.1%, respectively, and for Asian students, at 14%.¹²⁵

In sum, since the pandemic first struck in the 2019-20 school year, K-12 public school enrollment has dropped and has declined about 10% more than pre-pandemic predictions had anticipated. While enrollment rose slightly between the 2020-21 and 2022-23 school years, it fell again in 2023-24 and 2024-25, the most recent two years of non-projective data.¹²⁶ In the South, however, enrollment decreases during the pandemic were smaller, and the share of U.S. students attending public school in the South grew to more than 40% by 2023.

Diversity and Segregation

Increasing levels of racial diversity are accompanying these enrollment trends. The share of White students both nationally and in the South declined by about 8 percentage points between 2010-11 and 2022-23. The shares of students from most other census categories (Hispanic, Asian, Pacific Islanders, and students identifying as two or more races) increased both nationally and in the South.¹²⁷

The diversity of K-12 schools also was clear in the increasing enrollment of English learner (EL) students. Between 2011 and 2021, the percentage of EL students grew from 9.4% to 10.6% of the total public school enrollment in the U.S.¹²⁸ Texas (20.2%), California (18.9%), and New Mexico (18.8%) enrolled the highest percentages of EL students in the nation.

122 Ibid.

123 NCES. (2021). *Enrollment and percentage distribution of enrollment in public schools, by family poverty rate of 5- to 17-year-olds living in the school district, student race/ethnicity, region, and school locale: 2018-19*. Retrieved March 1, 2026 from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d20/tables/dt20_203.75.asp

124 NCES. (2023). *Enrollment and percentage distribution of enrollment in public schools, by family poverty rate of 5- to 17-year-olds living in the school district, student race/ethnicity, region, and school locale: School year 2020-21*. Retrieved March 1, 2025 from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22_203.75.asp

125 Ibid.

126 NCES. (2026). *Enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools, by region, state, and jurisdiction: Selected years, fall 1990 through fall 2024*. Retrieved June 1, 2026 from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d25/tables/dt25_203.20.asp

127 NCES. (2023). *Enrollment and percentage distribution of enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools, by race/ethnicity and region: Selected years, fall 1995 through fall 2031*. Retrieved March 1, 2025 from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23_203.50.asp?current=yes.

128 NCES. (2024). *English learners in public schools*. Retrieved March 1, 2025 from <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cgf/english-learners-in-public-schools>

Changes in public school enrollment, 2010-2023

Census category	Percentage of public K-12 enrollment, 2010-11		Percentage of public K-12 enrollment, 2022-23		Increase/decrease, in percentage points, between 2010-11 school year and 2022-23 school year	
	South	National	South	National	South	National
American Indian/ Alaska Native	1.1%	1.1%	0.7%	0.9%	-0.4%	-0.2%
Asian	2.8%	4.6%	3.9%	5.5%	+1.1%	+0.9%
Black	24.2%	16%	22.3%	14.9%	-1.9%	-1.1%
Hispanic	22.4%	23.1%	29.0%	28.9%	+6.6%	+5.8%
Pacific Islander	0.1%	0.3%	0.2%	0.4%	+0.1%	+0.1%
Two or More Races	2.3%	2.4%	4.6%	4.9%	+2.3%	+2.5%
White	47.2%	52.4%	39.4%	44.5%	-7.8%	-7.9%

Source: NCES, 2023

The 2022-23 school year is the most recent for which NCES has non-projective data, but national projections through the 2031-32 school year suggest that this trend will continue, although to a lesser degree.

Projected K-12 public school enrollment, 2031-32

Census category	Projected 2031-32 percentage of national public K-12 enrollment	Projected change from 2022-23 numbers
American Indian/ Alaska Native	0.8%	-0.1%
Asian	6.0%	+0.5%
Black ¹²⁹	14.4%	-0.5%
Hispanic	30.3%	+1.4%
Pacific Islander	0.4%	0%
Two or More Races	6.1%	+1.2%
White	42.0%	-2.5%

Source: NCES, 2023

While student diversity has increased in recent years, data show that racial segregation in schools has increased as well. SEF's 2024 report *Miles To Go: The State of Education for Black Students in America* highlights that by many measures, racial segregation is greater today

than in 1968: 81% of Black students in the U.S. and 82% in the South attend schools whose enrollment is majority students of color.¹³⁰ These rates are up nearly 30 points in the South and 20 points nationally compared with rates in the mid-1970s, following the desegregation strategies that school districts began to use in the wake of *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Desegregation and resegregation in U.S. public K-12 schools

Year	Percentage of Black students attending schools enrolling a majority students of color	
	National	South
1968	77%	81%
1976	62%	55%
1980	63%	57%
1988	63%	57%
1991	66%	60%
2005	73%	72%
2018	81%	82%

Source: Orfield & Jarvie, 2020.

Increasing segregation also raises questions about how to best support and sustain primarily Black schools and the students, families, and communities they serve.¹³¹

129 As Hispanic students are counted separately here, the other racial categories in this table reflect non-Hispanic students only.

130 Altman, M. (2024) *Miles to go: The state of education for Black students in America*. Southern Education Foundation. <https://southerneducation.org/what-we-do/milestogo2024/>; Orfield, G., & Jarvie, D. (2020). *Black segregation matters: School resegregation and Black educational opportunity*. UCLA: The Civil Rights Project / Proyecto Derechos Civiles. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4jp1z62n>

131 Morris, J. E., Parker, B. D., & Negrón, L. M. (2022). Black school closings aren't new: Historically contextualizing contemporary school closings and Black community resistance. *Educational Researcher*, 51(9), 575-583. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X221131504>

As segregation grows but the Black educator workforce shrinks, researchers are increasingly raising concerns that aspects of community and shared context linked to Black teachers and Black administrators serving Black students in the pre-*Brown* era are vanishing in schools that continue to serve Black students and communities but whose teachers and administrators are now largely White.¹³²

Not only is segregation harmful for *all* students, and for schools, districts, neighborhoods, and communities — see the 2024 *Miles To Go* report for a detailed discussion of data on this topic¹³³ — it is also expensive. A 2022 EdTrust analysis found the funding gap between districts serving the highest and lowest percentage of students of color to be even larger than the gap between those serving the highest and lowest percentage of students in poverty, and this gap appears to be *growing*: Between the 2015 and 2018 analyses the gap shrunk slightly from 15% to 13%, but by the 2022 analysis it had grown to 16% — even higher than before.¹³⁴ In a district of 5,000 students, 16% less funding means approximately **\$13.5 million in lost resources per year** — enough, as one example, to hire nearly 200 additional teachers at national average salaries.¹³⁵

A post-pandemic analysis also found that districts that are more racially segregated have lower district revenues than districts in the same state that are less racially segregated, even when accounting for poverty.¹³⁶ These funding disparities again reflect a major gap in opportunity to learn in these underfunded districts, which further limits the pool of students with fair opportunities to succeed educationally and successfully enter the workforce.

Other Enrollment/Attendance Considerations

Attendance issues, and particularly chronic absenteeism — missing at least 15 days of school in a single year, whether those absences are excused or unexcused¹³⁷ — have been an ongoing challenge in U.S. schools and were greatly exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the pandemic there were more than 8 million students in U.S. schools who were chronically absent, but this number nearly doubled, to 14.7 million students, by the 2021-22 school year.¹³⁸ By that year, two-thirds of *all* students were attending a school where at least 20% of students were chronically absent. Only about a quarter of students had attended such a school before the pandemic started.

Schools with chronically absent students

		30% or more	20% or more
Elementary Schools	2017-18	7%	18%
	2021-22	38%	60%
Middle Schools	2017-18	8%	22%
	2021-22	40%	66%
High Schools	2017-18	31%	50%
	2021-22	56%	77%
All Schools	2017-18	14%	28%
	2021-22	43%	65%

Source: Attendance Works, 2023

132 Walker, V. S. (2000). *Their highest potential: An African American school community in the segregated South*. Univ of North Carolina Press.

133 Altman, M. (2024) *Miles to go: The state of education for Black students in America*. Southern Education Foundation. <https://southerneducation.org/what-we-do/milestogo2024/>

134 Morgan, I. (2022). *Equal Is not good enough: An analysis of school funding equity across the US and within each state*. EdTrust. <https://edtrust.org/rti/equal-is-not-good-enough/>; Morgan, I. & Amerikaner, A. (2018). *Funding gaps: An analysis of school funding equity across the U.S. and within each state*. EdTrust.; https://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/FundingGaps2015_TheEducationTrust1.pdf

135 Morgan, I. (2022). *Equal Is not good enough: An analysis of school funding equity across the US and within each state*. EdTrust. <https://edtrust.org/rti/equal-is-not-good-enough/>; Teacher pay example based on National Education Association's 2025 teacher pay data, e.g., NEA Research. (2025, April). *Rankings of the States 2024 and Estimates of School Statistics 2025*. National Education Association. <https://www.nea.org/resource-library/educator-pay-and-student-spending-how-does-your-state-rank>

136 Weathers, E. S., & Sosina, V. E. (2022). Separate remains unequal: Contemporary segregation and racial disparities in school district revenue. *American Educational Research Journal*, 59(5), 905-938. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312221079297>

137 U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.). *Chronic absenteeism in the nation's schools: A hidden educational crisis*. Retrieved March 1, 2026 from <https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/chronicabsenteeism.html#one>

138 Chang, H., Balfanz, R., & Byrnes, V. (2023, October 12). *Rising tide of chronic absence challenges schools*. Attendance Works. <https://www.attendanceworks.org/rising-tide-of-chronic-absence-challenges-schools/>

Research shows that consistent attendance at school is associated with increased student well-being, higher academic achievement, and improved personal development.¹³⁹ Chronic absenteeism is associated with lower academic outcomes, as well as lowered educational and social engagement.¹⁴⁰

Attendance is not simply a function of students' (or their families') desire to attend school. Many of the factors in SEF's Social Determinants of Education framework can affect students' ability to attend school regularly, including the availability and costs of transportation, housing, workforce issues (e.g., parents' availability to help get students to school; students' own employment), safety, and physical and mental health and well-being.

AttendanceWorks, a national organization focused on addressing chronic absenteeism, identifies four categories of reasons students miss school:

1. *barriers*, including physical health, transportation, housing and food insecurity, home situation, and community violence;
2. *aversion*, which includes academic and behavioral challenges, school climate, social/peer issues, anxiety, and bias in school discipline;
3. *disengagement*, which includes classroom instruction that is not culturally responsive, lack of meaningful

relationships with adults at school, missing academic or behavioral supports, work conflicts, and boredom; and

4. *misconceptions*, which include students' and families' mindsets that only unexcused absences are a problem, learning is not affected when missing a couple of days each month, any symptom of potential illness requires students to stay home, or that attendance in elementary grades matters less than later in school, as well as incorrect tracking of absences that have accumulated.¹⁴¹

A number of approaches for addressing chronic absenteeism have shown encouraging results, although these strategies are still far too rare in schools — particularly schools serving students of color.¹⁴² One of the most common and most effective approaches is the implementation of multitiered systems of supports (MTSS), an integrated and holistic set of practices and interventions that support students academically and behaviorally, with focus in areas like social and emotional learning — discussed in greater detail in the Holistic Student Supports box later in this chapter — and attendance. Research has found evidence that MTSS practices, such as text messages and postcards to support and encourage student attendance, have direct positive effects on attendance.¹⁴³ Check & Connect is a related holistic, evidence-based strategy¹⁴⁴

139 E.g., Kearney, C. A., & Graczyk, P. A. (2020). A multidimensional, multi-tiered system of supports model to promote school attendance and address school absenteeism. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 23(3), 316-337. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10567-020-00317-1>; Allison, M. A., & Attisha, E. (2019). The link between school attendance and good health. *Pediatrics*, 143(2). <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2018-3648>

140 Gottfried, M. A. (2014). Chronic absenteeism and its effects on students' academic and socioemotional outcomes. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR)*, 19(2), 53-75. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10824669.2014.962696>

141 Attendance Works. (n.d.) *Why are so many students missing so much school?* <https://www.attendanceworks.org/resources/toolkits/teaching-attendance-2-0/use-data-for-intervention-and-support/strategy-2-consider-needed-supports/why-are-so-many-students-missing-so-much-school/>; Attendance Works. (2025). *Identify the root cause of absence*. <https://www.attendanceworks.org/chronic-absence/addressing-chronic-absence/3-tiers-of-intervention/root-causes/>

142 Miller, J., Nathanson, L., Hoang, T.R., Abdullah, T., & Altman, M. (2025). *Supporting positive attendance outcomes: Seven frequently asked questions about student engagement and attendance*. Equity Assistance Center - South. <https://eacsouth.org/guides-and-tools/chronic-absenteeism-why-showing-up-matters/>

143 Heppen, J. B., Kurki, A., and Brown, S. (2020). *Can texting parents improve attendance in elementary school? A test of an adaptive messaging strategy: Appendix (NCEE 2020-006a)*. National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance. Retrieved March 1, 2025 from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED607614.pdf>

Rogers, T., Duncan, T., Wolford, T., Ternovski, J., Subramanyam, S., and Reitano, A. (2017). *A randomized experiment using absenteeism information to "nudge" attendance*. REL 2017-252. Regional Educational Laboratory Mid-Atlantic. Retrieved March 1, 2025 from https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/regions/midatlantic/pdf/REL_2017252.pdf

144 Guryan, J., Christenson, S., Claessens, A., Engel, M., Lai, I., Ludwig, J., Turner, A.C., & Turner, M. C. (2017). *The effect of mentoring on school attendance and academic outcomes: A randomized evaluation of the Check & Connect Program* (Working Paper WP-16-18). Northwestern Institute for Policy Research. Retrieved from <https://www.ipr.northwestern.edu/our-work/working-papers/2016/WP-16-18.html>

shown to be effective,¹⁴⁵ including individualized student supports around attendance, academics, and behavior, implemented in partnership with community organizations and families.

The need is clear: In the wake of the pandemic, chronic absenteeism has reached dangerously high levels and is affecting student outcomes, limiting opportunity for success for too many students, and thus limiting the education attainment levels needed to support a healthy national economy. In this instance, there are already a number of agreed-upon practices that have been shown to address these issues. Far more students need access to these practices in schools.

Further, the need for individualized support highlights the uniqueness of students’ identities and contexts. This is particularly true in the case of students from marginalized communities, including students of color, who may see the least benefit from the more traditional, less effective approaches to attendance still common in many U.S. schools — many of which were developed with a focus on White students, particularly White middle- and upper-class students, and do not reflect the breadth and diversity of today’s students across the country.¹⁴⁶

High School Graduation Rates

As discussed in a prior SEF report,¹⁴⁷ few students actively drop out of school — only 2.6% did in the 2023-24 school year — but many more do not graduate. There are clear disparities among students who do drop out. Pacific Islander (5.3%), American Indian/Alaska Native (5.1%) and Black students (3.6%) drop out at two to

three times the rate of White students (1.8%) and three to five times the rate of Asian students (1.1%). Hispanic students and students identifying as two or more races were at 3.4% and 2.8%, respectively.¹⁴⁸

Dropout rate by race

Student population	Event dropout rate
Pacific Islander	5.3%
American Indian/ Alaska Native	5.1%
Black	3.6%
Hispanic	3.4%
Two or More Races	2.8%
Total	2.6%
White	1.8%
Asian	1.1%

Source: NCES, 2026

Dropout rates are also *much* higher for students with disabilities, with more than 15% of individuals ages 14-21 served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part B dropping out of school in the 2021-22 school year, including more than 19% of Black students with disabilities (about 1 in 5).¹⁴⁹

Many more students remain in school but do not acquire the credits and/or meet the other requirements necessary to graduate and receive a diploma. Research in the 2010s found that 18% of high schoolers nationally — and more than 30% of Black high schoolers nationally — did not graduate in four years. Such disparities in high school graduation by race have continued past the pandemic. Data from the 2022-23 school year show that

145 What Works Clearinghouse. (2015). Check and Connect. WWC intervention report. Retrieved March 1, 2025 from https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/InterventionReports/wwc_checkconnect_050515.pdf

146 E.g., Altman, M. (2024). *Miles to go: The state of education for Black students in America*. Southern Education Foundation. <https://southerneducation.org/what-we-do/milestogo2024/>

147 Altman, M. (2024). *Miles to go: The state of education for Black students in America*. Southern Education Foundation. <https://southerneducation.org/what-we-do/milestogo2024/>

148 NCES. (2026). Number and percentage of 9th- to 12th-graders who dropped out of public schools (event dropout rate), by race/ethnicity, grade, and state or jurisdiction: School year 2023-24. Retrieved March 1, 2026 from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d25/tables/dt25_219.50.asp. NCES defines the “event dropout rate” as “the percentage of public school students in grades 9 through 12 who dropped out of school between one October and the next.” They also note that data for ungraded students were prorated based on the counts for graded students.

149 NCES. (2023). *Number and percentage distribution of 14- through 21-year-old students served under Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Part B, who exited school, by exit reason, sex, race/ethnicity, age, and type of disability: School years 2020-21 and 2021-22*. Retrieved March 1, 2025 from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23_219.90.asp?current=yes

Asian/Pacific Islander (API) students and White students nationwide graduated at rates higher than their share of enrolled students — API students were 5.5% of students but 6.3% of graduates, and White students were 44.5% of enrolled students but 47.5% of graduates — while AIAN students, Black students, Hispanic students, and students identifying as two or more races all graduated at rates below their school enrollment rates.

Graduation rates are of even greater concern in the South than in the nation as a whole. The averaged freshman graduation rate (AFGR) measures the estimated percentage of students who receive what the NCES calls a “regular diploma” within four years of entering ninth grade. Only five of the 17 southern states — Kentucky, Missouri, Oklahoma, Texas, and Virginia — had post-pandemic AFGRs higher than the national average of 87.4%, with some substantially behind. Louisiana, for example, had an AFGR of 76.9%, more than 10 percentage points below the national average. When looking at graduation rates by state and race,¹⁵⁰ *every Southern state in the 2021-22 school year had a lower graduation rate for Black students and Hispanic students and a higher rate for White students than its state average that year* (except Oklahoma, for which 2021-22 data are not available but which showed the same pattern the previous year). *No states* in the Southern region graduate Black or Hispanic students in four years at or above the overall average graduation rates for each state. In contrast, White students graduate in four years at above average rates in *every* Southern state. These consistent patterns reflect a serious challenge to the goal of creating postsecondary and workforce opportunities for all that are not artificially limited by arbitrary student characteristics.

School Funding and Resource Allocation

School funding is a critical component to ensuring all students get the resources they need when they need them and are able to thrive in high-quality schools — a key component of the Social Determinants of Education framework. The landscape has changed dramatically in the past several years, exacerbating inequitable effects on vulnerable student populations. This section explores the state of school funding post-pandemic, highlighting factors like funding formulas, the impact of local property taxes, the role of COVID-19 federal relief funding and its subsequent expiration, the expansion of school vouchers, and the new wave of school closures.

COVID Funding Cliff and Budget Cuts

States recently saw historic levels of education funding due to pandemic relief funds distributed by the federal government through the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund. Nearly \$190 billion for education was distributed to states, which used the funds for a wide array of improvements and resources, such as academic recovery, including tutoring and out-of-school programs; recruitment and retention of staff; and student well-being.¹⁵¹ However, as these funds expire, high-need districts, which received the highest levels of ESSER funding based on Title I provisions, are being disproportionately affected. The highest-need districts, as measured by the percentage of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch, received an average of \$6,228 per student in one-time federal supplemental funding, compared to \$1,356 for lower-need districts.¹⁵² With drastically reduced budgets, many high-need districts are being forced to make more cuts to critical investments in staff, programming, and student support. When the School Superintendents Association asked district leaders in 2023 how they

150 This analysis uses a similar measure to AFGR called adjusted cohort graduation rate [ACGR] that uses individual student level data to increase precision

151 Council of Chief State School Officers. (2023). *How states are using ESSER funds to strengthen high-quality out-of-school time learning*. <https://learning.ccsso.org/the-road-to-recovery-how-states-are-using-esser-funds-to-strengthen-high-quality-out-of-school-time-learning>

152 Roza, M. & Silberstein, K. (2023, September 12). *The ESSER fiscal cliff will have serious implications for student equity*. Brookings. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-esser-fiscal-cliff-will-have-serious-implications-for-student-equity/>

would prepare for the ESSER fiscal cliff, 53% of respondents reported they would have to decrease specialist staffing, 51% said they would need to reduce summer learning programs, and 42% indicated they would be forced to reduce staff compensation.¹⁵³ Recent analyses have found that of the 12 states most impacted by reductions or disruptions in federal funding,¹⁵⁴ all but one are located in the South.¹⁵⁵



In addition to the COVID funding cliff, school budgets will continue to be strained by a variety of factors, including state tax cuts. Federal aid during COVID followed by a period of economic recovery led to temporary budget surpluses, and many states used the opportunity to provide tax cuts.¹⁵⁶ The Center for Budget and Policy Priorities found that between 2021 and 2023, 26 states (including 10 Southern states) cut income tax rates, which, if reversed, could generate an additional \$124 billion in states' revenue by 2028. These cuts equal a 3.6% cut in general revenue over the next five years, but the figure is as high as 10.9% in North Carolina.¹⁵⁷ Most of these states still have chronically underfunded education budgets while forgoing additional revenue in the interest of tax cuts.¹⁵⁸

Funding Formulas and Tax/Neighborhood Resource Structure

Public schools rely heavily on state and local funding to operate. Typically, less than 10% comes from the federal government, though federal contributions tend to make up a larger portion of education budgets in the South.¹⁵⁹ Previous SEF publications have detailed how the legacy of housing segregation leads to the perpetual underfunding of certain schools.¹⁶⁰ Redlining practices in the mid-20th century resulted in decreased property values in majority-Black neighborhoods, effectively blocking families in those neighborhoods from accumulating wealth. This history of artificially reduced

153 The School Superintendents Association. (August 2023). *School district spending of American Rescue Plan funding, Part IV*. https://www.aasa.org/docs/default-source/advocacy/arp-survey-part-iv.pdf?sfvrsn=b69a67e1_3/ARP-Survey-Part-IV

154 Calculated based on the following three risk factors: More than 20% of students attend a high-need district, more than 30% of districts are defined as "high-need", and more than 10% of total education revenue is made up of federal funds.

155 Chantry, K. & FitzGerald, K. (2025, August 4). *These 12 states are most affected by federal education funding cuts*. ERS. <https://www.erstrategies.org/tap/federal-education-funding-impact-on-states/>. The states are Arkansas, Alabama, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and West Virginia.

156 Tharpe, W. (2023, November 30). *States' recent tax-cut spree creates big risks for families and communities*. Center for Budget and Policy Priorities. <https://www.cbpp.org/research/state-budget-and-tax/states-recent-tax-cut-sprees-creates-big-risks-for-families-and>

157 Ibid.

158 18 of the 26 states that cut income tax between 2021-2023 have funding levels below the national average; 12 scored a D or F in funding level. See Farrie, D. & Kim, R. (2025) *Making the grade*. Education Law Center. <https://edlawcenter.org/research/making-the-grade-2025/>

159 NCES. (2023). *Revenues for public elementary and secondary schools, by source of funds and state or jurisdiction: School year 2020-21*. Retrieved March 1, 2026 from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23_235.20.asp

160 E.g., Crowe, M. (2022). *Economic vitality and education in the South, part I: The South's pre-pandemic position*. Southern Education Foundation. <https://southerneducation.org/publications/economic-vitality-and-education-in-the-south-part-i-the-souths-pre-pandemic-position/>; Altman, M. (2024). *Miles to go: The state of education for Black students in America*. Southern Education Foundation. <https://southerneducation.org/what-we-do/milestogo2024/>

property values (despite paying higher property tax rates) leads to lower levels of local funding for those districts, which are often still heavily segregated by race.¹⁶¹ An analysis by the Shanker Institute of seven metro areas across the country found that 90% of the districts that enroll a majority of students of color spend below adequate funding levels, compared to just 12% of majority-White districts.¹⁶² Additionally, only one of the 200 districts found to have above adequate funding and testing outcomes enrolled a majority Black/Hispanic student population.

States typically use a formula to determine how much funding should be allocated to each district. There are three main types of funding formulas:¹⁶³

- **Student-based:** A base cost is associated with the education of an average student. That number is then multiplied by enrollment and adjusted for additional costs by adding specific multipliers, per-student amounts, or program-specific allocations. Examples include an added weight for English language learners or students living in poverty.
- **Resource-based:** Allocations are determined based on the cost of resources, such as staff salaries and course materials. Allocations to account for the additional cost of certain student groups may be made through per-student dollar amounts or program specific allocations.
- **Program-based:** Allocations are determined based on specific programs and initiatives, such as career and technical education (CTE) or bilingual education. Program-based formulas don't typically itemize costs of specific resources or categories of students.



While most states have a fully student-based funding formula, seven have fully resource-based formulas, and one has a fully program-based formula. Twelve states have a hybrid model. In the South, nine states have student-based formulas, three resource-based, and five hybrid.

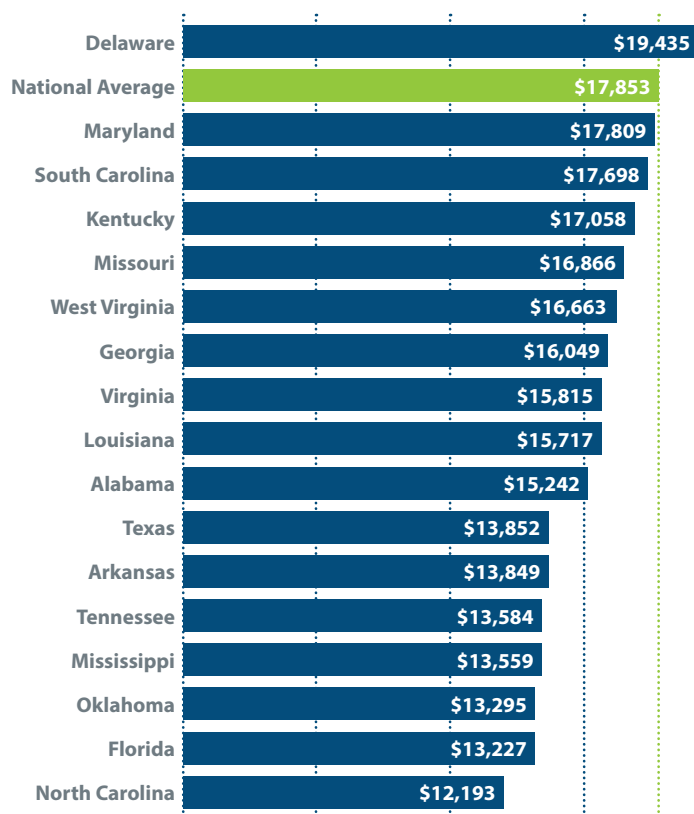
161 Crowe, M. (2022). *Economic vitality and education in the South, part I: The South's pre-pandemic position*. Southern Education Foundation. <https://southerneducation.org/publications/economic-vitality-and-education-in-the-south-part-i-the-souths-pre-pandemic-position/>; Altman, M. (2024). *Miles to go: The state of education for Black students in America*. Southern Education Foundation. <https://southerneducation.org/what-we-do/milestogo2024/>

162 Baker, B.D., Di Carlo, M., & Green, P. (2022). *Segregation and school funding: How housing discrimination reproduces unequal opportunity*. Albert Shanker Institute. <https://www.shankerinstitute.org/segfunding>

163 Edbuild. (2026). *FundED: National policy maps*. <http://funded.edbuild.org/national#formula-type>

The national per-student funding average is \$17,853,¹⁶⁴ though funding levels vary greatly across states and districts.¹⁶⁵ The Education Law Center’s annual *Making the Grade* report found that per-student funding levels in 16 of the 17 Southern states ranked below the national average. Ten of the 17 Southern states also ranked below the national average for funding effort, as measured by K-12 revenue as a percentage of the state GDP.¹⁶⁶

Cost-adjusted per-pupil funding relative to national average (2023)



Source: Education Law Center’s analysis of U.S. Census Annual Survey of School System Finances, 2023.

Data show notable disparities in funding by race and income level, as discussed above. There are also disparities in funding for districts with high populations of English learners, a group of students who often require additional resources such as bilingual educators or translation services.¹⁶⁷ EdTrust found that districts with the highest population of English learners received around \$2,200 less per student.¹⁶⁸

As addressed earlier in this report, communities with high concentrations of poverty often lack the level of school resources that low-poverty districts have. This is compounded with other issues highlighted in the Social Determinants of Education framework, such as food insecurity and housing instability.¹⁶⁹ Even when states allocate additional funding for these student populations, this practice doesn’t always fully counteract the disparities in local funding levels for schools. EdTrust found that local funding levels between high- and low-poverty schools are regressive — that they underfund high-poverty districts¹⁷⁰ — in 41 of 46 states examined.¹⁷¹ Even with states providing additional funding to the highest-poverty districts, in 15 states that funding was not enough to close the gaps in local funding. This trend is also present in districts with high concentrations of students of color: Local funding is regressive in 27 of the 43 states analyzed. Additional state funding closed this gap in only six of the 27 states.¹⁷²

164 Farrie, D. & Kim, R. (2025). *Making the grade*. Education Law Center. <https://edlawcenter.org/research/making-the-grade-2025/>

165 State and local school boards also play a role in deciding how funds are spent, an important factor to consider alongside funding level.

166 Farrie, D. & Kim, R. (2025). *Making the grade*. Education Law Center. <https://edlawcenter.org/research/making-the-grade-2025/>

167 Morgan, I. (2022). *Equal Is not good enough: An analysis of school funding equity across the US and within each state*. EdTrust. <https://edtrust.org/rti/equal-is-not-good-enough/>

168 Ibid.

169 Poverty & Race Research Action Council. (2011). *Annotated bibliography: The impact of school-based poverty concentration on academic achievement & student outcomes*. https://www.prrac.org/pdf/annotated_bibliography_on_school_poverty_concentration.pdf

170 Funding structures that provide high-poverty districts with *higher* levels of funding are considered *progressive*, while those providing *less* funding to these districts are considered *regressive*.

171 Hawai’i was excluded because it only has one school district, Alaska because of exceptional regional differences in education cost, Vermont because of “data anomalies,” and Nevada because of an inability to split its districts into quartiles.

172 Morgan, I. (2022). *Equal Is not good enough: An analysis of school funding equity across the US and within each state*. EdTrust. <https://edtrust.org/rti/equal-is-not-good-enough/>

Weighted Funding Formulas

Research has found that increased funding, particularly for students and districts with a history of disinvestment, improves test scores, graduation rates, earnings, and other outcomes.¹⁷³ Weighted funding formulas (sometimes called student-based funding) can be an effective way to account for the unique needs of certain student populations. In addition to a base amount of per-pupil funding, weighted formulas add a multiplier for students who fall into certain groups, such as English learners, economically disadvantaged students, or students with disabilities. Evidence suggests that increased spending in high-need schools narrows opportunity gaps: An analysis of California's Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) by The Learning Policy Institute found improved academic achievement, a reduction in grade repetition, lower suspension rates, and increased likelihood of graduation and college readiness.¹⁷⁴

Forty-four states allocate additional funding for students living in poverty; three of the six states that do not are in the South (Georgia, West Virginia, and Florida).¹⁷⁵ Forty-eight states allocate additional funds for English learners; Mississippi and Montana are the only states that do not.¹⁷⁶

School Vouchers and the Use of Public Funds for Private Schools

Previous SEF publications have detailed the history of the school privatization movement.¹⁷⁷ Originating as a strategy to circumvent school desegregation, the 1950s and 1960s saw the beginning of an unprecedented establishment of private schools, along with increases in private school enrollment and laws that expressly authorized the use of public funds for private schools, sometimes referred to as "segregation academies."¹⁷⁸ As of the 2025-26 school year, 15 of the 17 SEF states have at least one private school voucher program — and some have multiple such programs.

Private schools are often not required to meet state standards for curriculum, teacher licensing, and building or safety codes. Numerous studies have found no clear academic benefits for students using vouchers, and in some cases, voucher students fare worse academically than comparable students in the public school system. An analysis of Maryland's school voucher program found that in 9 out of 10 grade levels, voucher students scored at least 12 percentage points *lower* in English than their public school counterparts.¹⁷⁹ In Tennessee, 52% of voucher recipients scored "Below Expectations" in math on the statewide academic achievement assessment compared to 37% of students in public schools.¹⁸⁰

Students in private schools also do not have the same civil rights protections as students in public schools. For students with disabilities, families are often required to waive their rights under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) upon enrolling in

173 Baker, B.D. & Knight, D. (2025). *Does money matter in education?* Albert Shanker Institute. https://www.shankerinstitute.org/sites/default/files/2025-01/moneymatters3rdedition_final.pdf

174 Johnson, R. (2023). *School funding effectiveness: Evidence from California's local control funding formula*. Learning Policy Institute. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/school-funding-effectiveness-ca-lcff-report>

175 Edbuild. (2026). *FundED: National policy maps*. <http://funded.edbuild.org/national#poverty>

176 Edbuild. (2026). *FundED: National policy maps*. <http://funded.edbuild.org/national#ell>

177 E.g. Southern Education Foundation. (n.d.) *A history of private schools and race in the American South*. <https://southerneducation.org/publications/history-of-private-schools-and-race-in-the-american-south/>

178 Ibid.

179 Maryland State Department of Education. (2024). *Broadening Options and Opportunities for Students Today (BOOST) 2023-2024*. <https://marylandpublicschools.org/Documents/boost/20232024/JCR-Report-BOOST-Jan-24-A.pdf>

180 Tennessee Department of Education (2023). *Tennessee Education Savings Account Annual Report*. https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/esa/2023-24_ESA%20Annual%20Report.pdf

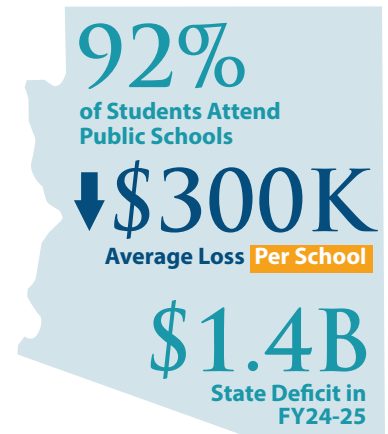
private schools.¹⁸¹ Investigations in Georgia,¹⁸² North Carolina,¹⁸³ and Florida¹⁸⁴ have found that many private schools with explicit anti-LGBTQ+ policies accept taxpayer-funded vouchers, and a study of Louisiana's voucher program found that it had a negative impact on the racial integration of private schools.¹⁸⁵ An SEF study of Georgia's first tax-credit scholarship program in 2011 found that 54% of White private school attendees were in schools that were at least 90% White, compared to 13% of White public school attendees.¹⁸⁶

From a funding perspective, research in states with school voucher programs shows that these programs are often very expensive, can lack appropriate oversight on spending, and hurt state budgets by transferring taxpayer funds into the private sector.¹⁸⁷ The effect can be particularly devastating for rural school districts.¹⁸⁸ Rural communities, by nature of their lower density of homes and businesses, raise less local tax revenue to support their schools. This is especially true for low-income rural communities and can mean severe budget cuts if the state funding is impacted by vouchers. For example, a study in Kentucky estimated that eight rural school districts would have to cut their budgets by 20%, compared to 10% for the two largest urban districts, if vouchers were implemented.¹⁸⁹ In addition to inequitable budget cuts, many rural areas have

no private schools at all. One study mapping access to private and public schools found that only 34% of students in rural communities in the U.S. had a private school within five miles of them, compared to 92% of urban students.¹⁹⁰ In Tennessee, 42% of rural districts had no private schools.

In Arizona, the first state to implement a universal school voucher program, most students using the program have not come from public schools, representing an additional cost that the state was not previously paying. The program has ballooned far beyond initial estimates, costing the state \$738 million in 2024 and making up 53% of new education spending.

The state's public schools, still responsible for educating 92% of students, are now receiving an average of \$300,000 less in state funding per school. The universal voucher program has substantially impacted the state's overall budget, with Arizona facing a combined deficit of \$1.4 billion in fiscal year 2024 and fiscal year 2025.¹⁹¹



Source: Blagg, K. & Chingos, M.M., 2017

181 Almazan, S. & Marshall, D.S. (2016). *School vouchers and students with disabilities: examining impact in the name of choice*. Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates. www.copaa.org/resource/resmgr/docs/Policy_Docs/COPAA_Voucher_paper_final_R6.pdf

182 Morris, A. (2013, October 10). *The hidden war against gay teens*. Rolling Stone. <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/the-hidden-war-against-gay-teens-66383/>

183 Fitzsimon, C. (2016, July 27). *More taxpayer funding for voucher schools that openly discriminate against LGBT students and parents*. NC Newsline. <https://ncnewsline.com/2016/07/27/more-taxpayer-funding-for-voucher-schools-that-openly-discriminate-against-lgbt-students-and-parents/>

184 Martin, A. (2020, January 23). *Anti-LGBT Florida schools getting school vouchers*. Orlando Sentinel. <https://www.orlandosentinel.com/2020/01/23/anti-lgbt-florida-schools-getting-school-vouchers/>

185 Mills, J.N., Egalite, A.J., & Wolf, P.J. (2016). *How has the Louisiana scholarship program affected students?* Education Research Alliance for New Orleans. <https://educationresearchalliancenola.org/files/publications/ERA-Policy-Brief-Public-Private-School-Choice-160218.pdf>

186 Southern Education Foundation. (2011). *A failed experiment: Georgia's tax credit scholarships for private schools*. <https://southerneducation.org/wp-content/uploads/documents/a-failed-experiment-georgia-s-tax-credit-scholarships.pdf>

187 Jones, F. & Burns, D. (2025). *School voucher fact sheet*. Southern Education Foundation. https://southerneducation.org/pdfviewer/school-voucher-fact-sheet/?auto_viewer=true#page=&zoom=global&pagemode=global; Walker, T. (2024, February 2). *No accountability: Vouchers wreak havoc on states*. National Education Association. <https://www.nea.org/nea-today/all-news-articles/no-accountability-vouchers-wreak-havoc-states>

188 Edtrust. (2024). *How school vouchers hurt rural communities*. <https://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Vouchers-Rural-Communities-Brief-FINAL.pdf>

189 Ibid.

190 Blagg, K. & Chingos, M.M. (2017). *Who could benefit from school choice? Mapping access to public and private schools*. Brookings. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/es_20170330_chingos_evidence_speaks.pdf

191 Edtrust. (2024). *The financial impact of school vouchers: Lessons from Arizona*. <https://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Lessons-From-Arizona-1-Pager-FINAL.pdf>

This financial impact is also taking hold in Florida, which made its voucher program universal in 2023. That year, \$3.2 billion in state funding went to vouchers, with \$2.1 billion of that coming from the state's school funding formula.¹⁹² It was estimated that in the 2024-25 school year, 18% of the state's public school funding, or \$2.8 billion, would be diverted to vouchers.¹⁹³ Numbers like these will severely affect public education funding in a state that already ranks the nation's lowest in Education Law Center's *Making the Grade* analysis of school funding, receiving F ratings for its state funding level, funding distribution, and funding effort.¹⁹⁴

In July 2025, the first *federal* voucher program was passed as part of H.R. 1, the budget reconciliation bill. With no spending cap and very broad income restrictions set at 300% of the area median income, this program has the potential to funnel billions of dollars of taxpayer funds into private schools when it goes into effect in 2027.

Data suggest that these rapid developments in school privatization threaten to undermine progress toward a well-funded public education system that can effectively serve all children, while also failing to produce notable benefits overall for the students who do participate. Given current trends, the shifting of public resources to private institutions that are not required to serve all

students again raises concerns about education systems' ability to prepare a range of students to successfully enter the workforce.

School Closures

Financial challenges, enrollment declines, and the desire to do away with "failing schools" can often result in school closures, where educational activities at a school are permanently suspended and students are redirected to other schools. Historically, there are disparities in the rates of these closures, with majority-Black schools closed more frequently than others even after controlling for factors such as enrollment decline or performance concerns.¹⁹⁵ Rural communities are also greatly affected by school closures through consolidation and mergers.¹⁹⁶ Post-COVID enrollment declines, the expiration of ESSER funds, and the proliferation of school vouchers have ushered in a new era of school closures that continue to reflect historical inequities.

Research has shown that school closures are often not effective cost-saving measures¹⁹⁷ and often have a negative impact on student outcomes.¹⁹⁸ While they can be a way to address falling enrollment or a lack of resources across a district, even the most well-executed closures can shift a neighborhood's identity and sense of belonging. For example, while recent closures in

192 Dollard, N. & McKillip, M. (2025) *Florida continues to drain much-needed funds away from public schools to private and home-school students*. Florida Policy Institute. <https://www.floridapolicy.org/posts/florida-continues-to-drain-much-needed-funds-away-from-public-schools-to-private-and-home-school-students>

193 Ibid

194 Farrie, D. & Kim, R. (2025) *Making the grade*. Education Law Center. <https://edlawcenter.org/research/making-the-grade-2025/>

195 Morris, J. E., Parker, B. D., & Negrón, L. M. (2022). Black school closings aren't new: Historically contextualizing contemporary school closings and Black community resistance. *Educational Researcher*, 51(9), 575-583. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X221131504>; Greene-Bell, D. & Pearman, F. (2024). Racialized closures and the shuttering of Black schools: Evidence from national data. *Harvard Educational Review*, 94(2)187-210; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17763/1943-5045-94.2.187>

It is important to note that while the harms of segregated schooling are discussed below, school closures that disproportionately affect majority-Black schools are not an effective strategy to address this issue and can create even more harm for Black students by eliminating aspects of community and shared context that can exist as great strengths in many schools with high enrollment numbers of Black students.

196 Smith, S.A., & Zimmer, R. (2022). *The impacts of school district consolidation on rural communities: Evidence from Arkansas reform*. (EdWorkingPaper: 22-530). Annenberg Institute at Brown University. <https://doi.org/10.26300/ghex-rp75>

197 Howley, C., Johnson, J., & Petrie, J. (2011). *Consolidation of schools and districts: What the research says and what it means*. National Education Policy Center. <https://nepc.colorado.edu/sites/default/files/PB-Consol-Howley-Johnson-Petrie.pdf>

198 Larsen M. F. (2020). Does closing schools close doors? The effect of high school closings on achievement and attainment. *Economics of Education Review*, 76, Article 101980. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0272775718305922?via%3Dihub>

San Antonio Independent School District avoided a disparate impact on particular student groups,¹⁹⁹ an external equity audit found that closures resulted in a school desert in one neighborhood, and many of the families and school staff interviewed expressed dismay with how the closures were handled.²⁰⁰ When these decisions are not made thoughtfully, as has historically been the case with marginalized communities,²⁰¹ closures can inflict serious socioemotional harm on the children who are uprooted from their neighborhood schools. Students impacted by school closures have reported a sense of loss or disruption of relationships and decreased trust in teachers upon moving to their new school.²⁰² At the community level, studies have documented decreased civic engagement and a decline in economic activity in communities impacted by school closures. This loss of cohesion is particularly severe when the shuttered schools had provided community services such as health care, something that is common in rural communities.²⁰³ It is critical to take into account the perspectives of those closest to the school when making decisions around consolidations and closures.



199 San Antonio Independent School District (2023). *Rightsizing equity report*. <https://www.saisd.net/page/rightsizing-resources>

200 Ibid.

201 Morris, J. E., Parker, B. D., & Negrón, L. M. (2022). Black school closings aren't new: Historically contextualizing contemporary school closings and Black community resistance. *Educational Researcher*, 51(9), 575-583. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X221131504>; Caven, M. (2019). Quantification, inequality, and the contestation of school closures in Philadelphia. *Sociology of Education*, 92(1) 21-40. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038040718815167>; Ewing, Eve L. *Ghosts in the schoolyard: Racism and school closings on Chicago's South Side*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018

202 Kirshner, B., Gaertner, M., & Pozzoboni, K. (2010). Tracing transitions: The effect of high school closure on displaced students. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 32(3), 407-429. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373710376823>

203 Edins, M., Pehrson, M., & Burgess, K. (2024). *Revisiting research on school closings: Key learnings for districts and community leaders*. Research for Action. <https://www.researchforaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/revisiting-research-on-school-closings-key-learnings-for-district-and-community-leaders.pdf>

Community Schools

With adequate resources, public schools can be well-positioned to provide support not only for students, but also for their families and communities. Many public schools partner with local community organizations and families to create *community schools* that provide a range of educational opportunities such as employment training, language and adult literacy classes, and wraparound supports such as health services. The Community Schools Playbook identifies four pillars to community schools:²⁰⁴

1. **Integrated student supports:** staff dedicated to addressing out-of-school learning barriers and mental and physical health services
2. **Expanded and enriched learning time and opportunities:** after-school or summer programs
3. **Active family and community engagement:** family involvement in child's education; schools are positioned as a community hub
4. **Collaborative leadership practices:** collaboration between parents, students, teachers, principals, and community partners

A community schools approach in high-poverty schools can yield positive benefits for students, such as closing opportunity gaps for low-income students and

English learners. Comprehensive research suggests that these school-based wraparound services improve student outcomes and can provide a return on investment of up to \$15 for every single dollar invested in economic and social benefits.²⁰⁵

Florida's Community Partnership Schools are an example of a powerful community schools model. In the 2023-24 school year, there were 43 Community Partnership Schools across the state, serving more than 43,000 families.²⁰⁶ An evaluation conducted by the American Institutes for Research in 2022 found that students in Community Partnership Schools had higher attendance rates and fewer disciplinary incidents. Additionally, Black students scored 8 points higher in mathematics, while White students performed 9 points higher in ELA, in the first year of implementation.²⁰⁷

SEF highlighted the model school for this initiative, Evans High School, in its 2016 report *Community Schools: Transforming Struggling Schools Into Thriving Schools*, authored in collaboration with the Center for Popular Democracy and the Coalition for Community Schools.²⁰⁸

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- 204 Partnership for the Future of Learning. (2018). *Community schools playbook*. <https://communityschools.futureforlearning.org/assets/downloads/community-schools-playbook.pdf>
- 205 Maier, A., Daniel, J., Oakes, J., & Lam, L. (2017). *Community schools as an effective school improvement strategy: A review of the evidence*. Learning Policy Institute. https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/media/137/download?inline&file=Community_Schools_Effective_REPORT.pdf
- 206 University of Central Florida. (n.d.). *UCF Center for Community Schools*. <https://ccie.ucf.edu/communityschools/>
- 207 Naftzger, N., Bradley, D., Clinton, T., Garcia, B., Blume, R., & Stargel, L. (2022). *Community partnership schools: An implementation and effectiveness evaluation: Key findings*. American Institutes for Research. <https://ccie.ucf.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/12/2022/08/UCF-Final-report-BRIEF.pdf>
- 208 Center for Popular Democracy. (2016). *Community schools: Transforming struggling schools into thriving schools*. https://populardemocracy.org/sites/default/files/Community-Schools-Layout_e.pdf

Academic Opportunities and Postsecondary Readiness

Access to Advanced Coursework

Access to rigorous and advanced courses at the high school level is associated with improved college preparation and outcomes.²⁰⁹ However, data from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights shows that Native American and Black students are less likely to attend schools with a full range of math and science courses than their peers.²¹⁰ While no national data set tracks advanced coursework outcomes, the Advanced Placement (AP) program is often used as a lens to understand access and success in various rigorous and college preparatory courses.²¹¹

AP courses are classes that students can take in high school to earn college credit.²¹² These courses are an option for students who seek more rigorous coursework and/or want a head start on their postsecondary education.²¹³ To earn college credit, students must complete the course and take an AP exam at the end of the year. If students earn a high enough score on the exam, colleges and universities may count these course credits, potentially reducing the time and cost of earning a postsecondary degree.²¹⁴ AP courses cover

a wide range of academic topics, including areas like math, science, English, history, foreign languages, and the arts.²¹⁵ While these courses are beneficial to students, participation varies by race and ethnicity. In the U.S., 49.4% of students enrolled in AP courses are White, 24.9% are Hispanic, 12% Asian, 9.5% Black, and 3.6% multiracial. American Indian and Alaska Native students and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander students each make up less than 1% of students enrolled in AP courses.²¹⁶

Access to AP courses is an issue. Research shows that some schools offer a plethora of AP courses, while others offer a limited number or none at all.²¹⁷ School processes may also discourage capable students from participating in AP courses; for example, they may require a certain grade-point average or standardized test score to enroll, rather than taking a holistic look at students' abilities, or they may require students to complete prerequisite courses before AP coursework.²¹⁸

Access to Accurate Curriculum/Freedom from Censorship

While this report highlights the need for more students to have access to rigorous curriculum, it is also being released in the midst of an attempt by state and national

209 E.g., Morgan, T. L., Zakhem, D., & Cooper, W. L. (2018). From high school access to postsecondary success: An exploratory study of the impact of high-rigor coursework. *Education Sciences*, 8(4), 191.

210 Bryant, R. (2015). *College preparation for African American students: Gaps in the high school educational experience*. Center for Law and Social Policy. <https://www.clasp.org/publications/report/brief/college-preparation-african-american-students-gaps-high-school-educational/>

211 Chatterji, R., Campbell, N., & Quirk, A. (2021, June 30). *Closing advanced coursework equity gaps for all students*. Center for American Progress. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/closing-advanced-coursework-equity-gaps-students/>

212 College Board. (n.d.) *What is AP?* <https://apstudents.collegeboard.org/what-is-ap>

213 An important note: while access to AP courses is often restricted based on things like GPA cutoffs, prerequisites, or teacher recommendation requirements, research shows that *all* students can benefit from AP course participation, including through improved academic skills, greater confidence, and increased future academic readiness. Ensuring that all students are able to access these and other rigorous courses is key to expanding access and improving outcomes more broadly. See, e.g., Equity Assistance Center-South at SEF: *Introduction: Why access to Advanced Placement matters*. EAC-South. <https://eacsouth.org/guides-and-tools/expanding-access-to-advanced-placement-for-all-students/>

214 College Board. (n.d.) *What is AP?* <https://apstudents.collegeboard.org/what-is-ap>

215 Ibid.

216 Civil Rights Data Collection Office for Civil Rights, U.S. Department of Education. (2020). *National data*. Retrieved March 1, 2026 from <https://civilrightsdata.ed.gov/profile/us?surveyYear=2020>

217 Patrick, K., Socol, A.R., & Morgan, I. (2020, January 9). *Inequities in advanced coursework*. EdTrust. <https://edtrust.org/rti/inequities-in-advanced-coursework/>

218 Patrick, K., Davis, J., & Socol, A.R. (2022, April 21). *Why are Black and Latino students shut out of AP STEM courses?* EdTrust. <https://edtrust.org/rti/why-are-black-and-latino-students-shut-out-of-ap-stem-courses/>; Patrick, K., Socol, A.R., & Morgan, I. (2020, January 9). *Inequities in advanced coursework*. EdTrust. <https://edtrust.org/rti/inequities-in-advanced-coursework/>. School districts also deal with issues like these in other instances related to advanced coursework, such as the assignment of students to "honors" or "gifted and talented" classes or programs. For more on this, see, e.g., Peters, S. J. (2021). The challenges of achieving equity within public school gifted and talented programs. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 66(2), 82-94. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00169862211002535>

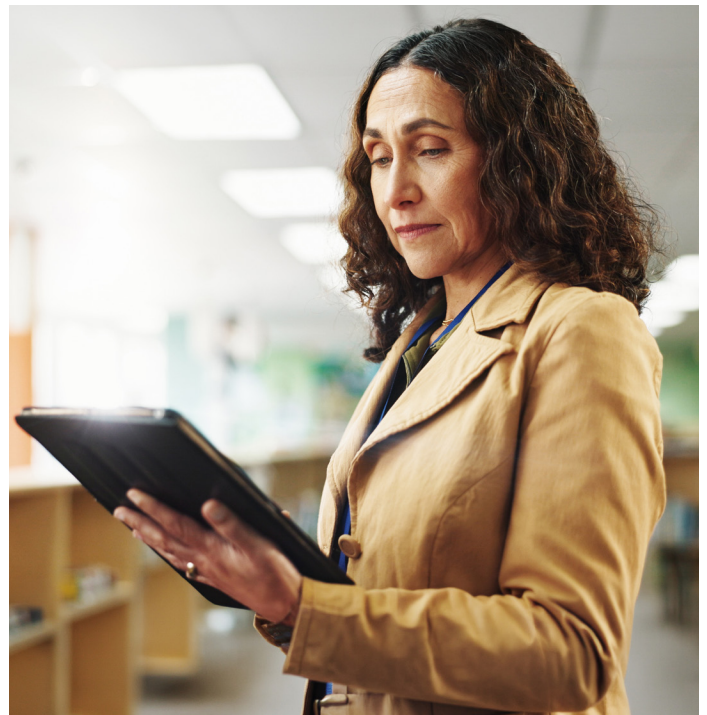
advocates and policymakers to remove key topics from the curriculum to which *all* students have access, including limiting discussion of race, racism, Black history, and LGBTQ+ and gender issues, among others. These attacks on curriculum are widespread. Since 2021, bills that prohibit or restrict race-conscious instruction have been passed by more than 45 states,²¹⁹ despite the fact that research conducted by the Southern Education Foundation and others has shown strong pushback from families and community members on what many have identified as educational censorship.²²⁰

All students must have access to a fact-based and historically accurate curriculum. Research in fields like education and law shows multiple ways that the current push to take away students' access to accurate curriculum stunts educational outcomes by limiting critical inquiry and learning and creating hostile learning environments that reduce student success.²²¹ Analysis finds that these curricular incursions are broadly unpopular.²²²

The content of the U.S. curriculum has never been neutral and cannot be neutral — by choosing what to cover and what not to cover, as well as how to address topics that are covered, implicit values choices are made that affect how students view and interpret the world. Data have been clear for many years that students learn better when they see more, not less, of themselves and of their experiences, community and cultural knowledge, and history in the curriculum.²²³ In many states and districts, this had inspired substantial conversation about how to most effectively create a curriculum that reflects the experiences and knowledge of a broader range of U.S. students, but much of that

important work has been derailed. The push to stop it has, notably, been led by non-educators often encouraged by political considerations. Policymakers in many states have mustered incredible force to silence discussion of race, gender, sexuality, and key human rights issues.

In addition to the harmful effects on students and the chilling of classroom discourse, these attacks on school curriculum can also harm teachers. See pages 55-56 for a discussion of how these attempts to censor curriculum and classroom discourse increase teacher stress, decrease teacher and student well-being, and affect the teacher workforce in an increasing number of states to an extent that teachers have lost their jobs and even been threatened with criminal prosecution for teaching their students based on evidence and best practices.



219 Watson, L. M. (2023). The anti-“critical race theory” campaign – classroom censorship and racial backlash by another name. *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review*, 58, 487. https://journals.law.harvard.edu/crcl/wp-content/uploads/sites/80/2023/09/HLC208_Watson.pdf

220 E.g., Altman, M. (2024). *Miles to go: The state of education for Black students in America*. Southern Education Foundation. <https://southerneducation.org/what-we-do/milestogo2024/>

221 E.g., Feingold, J. & Weishart, J. (2023). *How discriminatory censorship laws imperil public education*. National Education Policy Center. <http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/censorship>

222 E.g., Feingold, J. & Weishart, J. (2023). *How discriminatory censorship laws imperil public education*. National Education Policy Center. Retrieved March 1, 2026 from <http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/censorship>; Altman, M. (2024). *Miles to go: The state of education for Black students in America*. Southern Education Foundation. <https://southerneducation.org/what-we-do/milestogo2024/>

223 E.g., Ervin, J. (2022). Critically reading the canon: Culturally sustaining approaches to a prescribed literature curriculum. *Journal of Adolescent Adult & Literature*, 65(4), 321–329. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.1208>

Holistic Student Supports: Another Key Consideration for Increasing Opportunity

Educators recognize that, while academics are an important part of students' educational experience, supporting students' development holistically contributes to better outcomes.²²⁴ While there are many approaches, social and emotional learning (SEL), trauma-informed learning, culturally relevant pedagogy, and restorative practices are four methods to address the holistic development of students.

SEL: Social and emotional learning (SEL)²²⁵ is an important component of students' development in schools. SEL focuses on developing students' social and interpersonal skills and capacity to understand and regulate emotions. According to the CDC, SEL can support student mental health and a more positive school climate.²²⁶ While SEL has always been a part of good teaching practices, educators recognized that many students needed to practice their social and emotional skills after returning to in-person learning post-pandemic.²²⁷ SEL has many benefits for students, such as better academic outcomes, less disruptive behavior, and a better sense of safety and support at school.²²⁸

Restorative Practices: Disproportionate discipline outcomes in schools, particularly the overrepresentation of Black students facing

suspensions and law enforcement referrals, is a major issue both nationally and in the South. For example, Black students were suspended at by far the highest rates in the nation prior to the pandemic, with more than 12% of Black students receiving out-of-school suspensions nationally in 2017-18 compared to less than 5% of all students, and 13 out of 17 SEF states had out-of-school suspension rates for Black students that were even higher than the national average.²²⁹ These higher-than-average rates continued into the 2020-21 school year despite greatly reduced suspensions overall (due to COVID-19), with Black students again suspended at the highest rates of any group and 12 of 17 SEF states exceeding that average.²³⁰ This has prompted some districts to explore restorative approaches. Instead of using exclusionary discipline practices or punishing students, educators focus on relationship building, and communication strategies are used to resolve disagreements, repair harm, mediate conflict, and ultimately support students' reentry into the learning community. These methods are designed to build community, teach conflict-resolution skills, and meet students' social-emotional needs so that misbehaviors are less likely to occur.²³¹

continued on next page

- 224 Darling-Hammond, L. & Cook-Harvey, C. (2018). *Educating the whole child: Improving school climate to support student success*. Learning Policy Institute <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/educating-whole-child-report>
- 225 Defined as "the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions." See Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. (n.d.) *Fundamentals of SEL*. <https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/>
- 226 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2024, November 29). Mental Health. Retrieved June 30, 2026 from <https://www.cdc.gov/healthy-youth/mental-health/>
- 227 Darling-Hammond, L., Schachner, A., & Edgerton, A. K. (2020). *Restarting and reinventing school: Learning in the time of COVID and beyond*. Learning Policy Institute. https://restart-reinvent.learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Restart_Reinvent_Schools_COVID_REPORT.pdf
- 228 Greenberg, M.T. (2023). *Evidence for social and emotional learning in schools*. Learning Policy Institute. <https://doi.org/10.54300/928.269>
- 229 NCES. (2022). *Percentage of students suspended and expelled from public elementary and secondary schools, by sex, race/ethnicity, and state: 2017-18*. Retrieved March 1, 2026 from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d21/tables/dt21_233.40.asp?current=yes
- 230 NCES. (2024). *Percentage of students suspended and expelled from public elementary and secondary schools, by sex, race/ethnicity, and state or jurisdiction: School year 2020-21*. Retrieved March 1, 2026 from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23_233.40.asp
- 231 Learning Policy Institute. (2023). *Improving Student Outcomes Through Restorative Practices* [Fact sheet]. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/restorative-practices-factsheet>

Culturally Relevant Teaching: Culture plays an important role in education.²³² Students arrive at school with their own culturally informed understandings of the world, and educators utilize culturally relevant pedagogical practices to integrate many perspectives into learning experiences. This creates a more inclusive and engaging environment for all students, while also affirming the relevance of students' knowledge and enhancing their achievement.²³³ As already noted, the South is diversifying, making culturally relevant pedagogy a necessity, not an option, for improving long-term student outcomes at all levels of education.

Trauma-informed Learning: Trauma-informed learning is a teaching approach that accounts for the effects of trauma on student learning.²³⁴ When educators implement trauma-informed learning, they recognize the effects of trauma and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)²³⁵ on learning and structure students' classroom experiences and the overall climate of the school to account for this. Educators trained in trauma-sensitive care avoid punitive discipline and, instead, rely on co-regulation techniques and building nurturing relationships to help students develop self-soothing strategies.



Culture plays an important role in education. Students arrive at school with their own culturally informed understandings of the world.

232 In this context, culture is defined as the shared knowledge, values, beliefs, and symbols within a group. Here, this refers to culture that derives from one's racial or ethnic background. See Banks, J. A., & Banks, C. A. M. (Eds.). (2010). *Multicultural education: Issues and perspectives*. John Wiley & Sons.

233 Hammond, Z. (2015). *Culturally responsive teaching and the brain: Promoting authentic engagement and rigor among culturally and linguistically diverse students*. Corwin Press.

234 University of Georgia: Center for Teaching and Learning. (n.d.). Trauma-informed teaching. <https://ctl.uga.edu/teaching-resources/evidence-based-teaching-strategies/trauma-informed-teaching/>

235 Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood (0-17 years). See Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2026, March 2). *About adverse childhood experiences*. Retrieved April 1, 2026 from <https://www.cdc.gov/aces/about/index.html>

Access to Effective Postsecondary Preparation

Beyond the ability to learn from curriculum that is accurate, students need a broad range of curricular opportunities that can connect them to future goals. As students prepare for what comes after high school, they will seek diverse pathways that fit their interests and desired career outcomes. While this may include degree-granting programs at colleges and universities, the range of postsecondary possibilities is much broader — with many options within each potential path.

Research finds that many students are not fully aware of this range of options,²³⁶ which includes public and private two- and four-year institutions, including community and technical colleges; historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and other minority-serving institutions (MSIs)²³⁷ and predominantly White institutions (PWIs); and many types of non-degree certification and training programs, such as nursing, computer science, and heating, ventilation, and air

conditioning (HVAC). Even when they are aware of these options and have interest in them, many students lack equitable access to K-12 pathways into the full range of postsecondary options.²³⁸ In the next chapter, we further discuss the mismatch between students' postsecondary preparation and their practical postsecondary opportunities and outcomes.

Career and Technical Education

The way postsecondary options are prioritized for students often includes a clear perceived hierarchy, with four-year institutions at the top, community colleges below them, and career and technical education (CTE) and vocational training options at the bottom, often treated as a space for students tracked out of other opportunities.²³⁹ Research notes misperceptions that can lead to lowered interest and participation in CTE. This is of particular concern because studies show that CTE programs at the high school level can lower dropout rates, raise attendance and grades, and increase student interest in postsecondary education.²⁴⁰

Further, despite the common misperception that four-year colleges are the primary road to lucrative employment, CTE programs can enable students to transition more efficiently into the labor market.²⁴¹ When utilized as an option to increase students' access to career paths and not to discourage students from taking rigorous academic courses, CTE can be highly beneficial to many students. It provides a pathway to in-demand careers that require advanced training outside of a four-year bachelor's degree program. In the U.S., 98 percent of public school districts offer CTE



236 Padilla, E. A., Baker, R., & Beu, S. (2024). Student decision making and the choice of non-degree postsecondary pathways. *Career and Technical Education Research*, 49(3), 61-102. <https://doi.org/10.5328/cter49.3.61>

237 In addition to HBCUs, MSIs may include predominantly Black institutions (PBIs), which primarily serve Black students but do not meet the legal definition of HBCUs; Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs); tribal colleges and universities (TCUs); Native American non-tribal institutions (NANTIs); Alaska Native or Native Hawaiian-Serving Institutions (ANNHs/ANNHSIs), and Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs)

238 E.g., Perna, L., & Thomas, S. (2006). A framework for reducing the college success gap and promoting success for all. Washington, DC: National Postsecondary Education Cooperative.

239 Jackson, J. H., & Hasak, J. (2014). Look beyond the label: Reframing, reimagining, and reinvesting in CTE. *American Educator*, 38(3), p. 35. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1044033>

240 E.g., Greathouse Holman, A., Kupczynski, L., Mundy, M. A., & Williams, R. H. (2017). CTE students' perceptions of preparedness for post-secondary opportunities. *CTE Journal*, 5(2). <https://www.thectejournal.com/uploads/1/0/6/8/10686931/holman.pdf>

241 Jackson, J. H., & Hasak, J. (2014). Look beyond the label: Reframing, reimagining, and reinvesting in CTE. *American Educator*, 38(3), 34-39. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1044033>

programs to high school students, and 73 percent of districts offer CTE courses in which students can earn both high school and postsecondary credit.²⁴² Courses in CTE programs are offered in a variety of fields, such as computer science, information technology, agriculture, business, hospitality, and health care, with business, communication, and engineering being the most common CTE subject areas taken by students.²⁴³

Percentage of high school graduates who earned CTE credits by subject

CTE subject	Percentage
Business, finance, and marketing	36.4
Communication and communication technologies	26.8
Engineering, design, and production	22.9
Consumer services	20.8
Computer and information sciences	19.8
Agriculture and natural resources	13.8
Health care	13.6
Public services	11.5
Construction	9.4
Mechanical repair and operation	6.3

Source: NCES, 2019

Data from 2019 show that 84.6 percent of public and private high school graduates in the U.S. had earned at least one credit in a CTE course in high school — and the rate rose to 91 percent for students in the South.²⁴⁴ Male high school graduates (87.4%) were more likely to earn at least one CTE credit than female students (81.7%).²⁴⁵ American Indian/Alaska Native, Black, and White students were most likely to have earned at least one CTE credit during high school.²⁴⁶ In some school districts, students participating in CTE courses can earn certificates and gain experience through internships or on-the-job training that allow them to enter the workforce upon graduating high school.²⁴⁷ Providing students with a full range of preparation options in high school and working to counter misperceptions around CTE and other student pathways can contribute to increased workforce access and broaden opportunities for more students.

Standardized Testing

Many students take the ACT or SAT in high school, and scores from these tests traditionally have been a prerequisite for postsecondary admissions. These scores can determine students' ability to access credit-bearing courses (as opposed to non-credit remedial courses) in college, and can qualify students for merit-based financial aid.²⁴⁸ While in recent years there had been a movement toward "test-optional" college admissions

242 NCES. (2018). *Fast facts: Career and technical education*. Retrieved March 1, 2026 from <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=43>

243 NCES. (2019). *Percentage distribution of public high school graduates with each career and technical education (CTE) coursetaking pattern, by selected student race/ethnicity categories and gender: 2019*. Retrieved March 1, 2026 from <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ctes/tables/h259.asp>

244 NCES. (2024). *Career and technical education in the United States*. Condition of Education. Retrieved March 1, 2026 from <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/tob>; NCES. (2024). Table 225.25. *Percentage of public and private high school graduates who earned at least one Carnegie credit in selected career/technical education courses in high school, by selected student and school characteristics: 2019*. Retrieved March 1, 2026 from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22_225.25.asp. Note that these numbers are for the Census South region, which includes Washington, D.C., and does not include Missouri.

245 NCES. (2024). Table 225.25. *Percentage of public and private high school graduates who earned at least one Carnegie credit in selected career/technical education courses in high school, by selected student and school characteristics: 2019*. Retrieved March 1, 2026 from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22_225.25.asp

246 Ibid.

247 NCES. (2018). *Fast facts: Career and technical education*. Retrieved March 1, 2026 from <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=43>

248 College Board. (n.d.) *SAT vs. ACT: Which test should I take?* <https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org/plan-for-college/apply-to-college/sat/sat-vs-act>

— especially during the pandemic — the SAT and ACT remain an important part of postsecondary preparation, and many schools are returning to requiring these tests.²⁴⁹

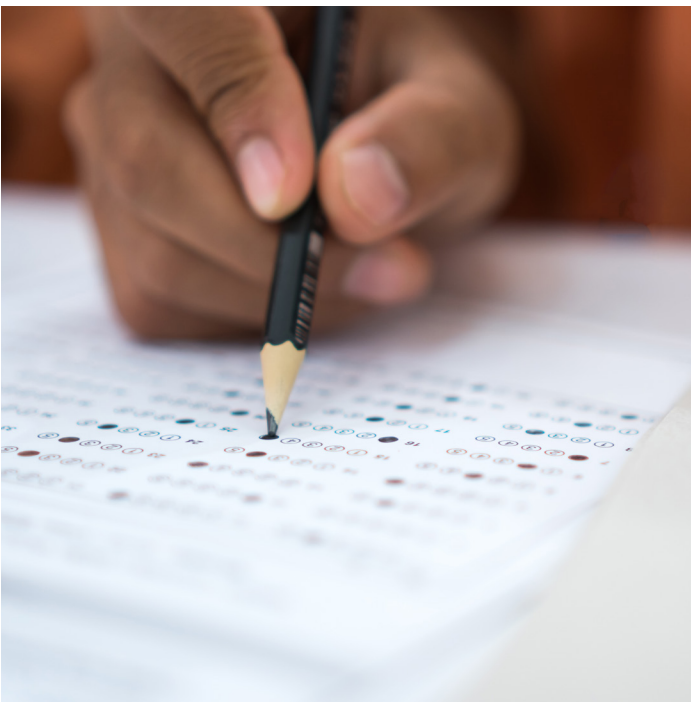
Scores on and participation in the ACT and SAT have varied across time. In recent years, average scores on the SAT have declined, but SAT-taking has increased since the pandemic, from more than 1.7 million high school seniors taking the test in 2017 to more than 1.9 million in 2023 (see the table below).²⁵⁰

Changes in average SAT scores
***Maximum score of 1600**

Year	Number of high school seniors taking test	Average score
2017	1,715,000	1060
2021	1,509,000	1060
2022	1,738,000	1050
2023	1,914,000	1028

Source: NCES, 2023

ACT: Data show similar trends in ACT scores. Average scores on the ACT fell from 21 in 2017 to 19.5 in 2023. ACT states that most students need a score of 20 to 24 to be competitive for admissions at “mid-tier” colleges; this drop lowered the average from within this range to below it.²⁵¹ Participation in the ACT has also declined, from about 2 million high school seniors taking the test in 2017 to less than 1.4 million in 2023. This is a drop from the 2016 high point of 58% of students taking the test to numbers that are similar to the rates in the 90s — 38 percent of high school graduates took the test in 1995, and 37 percent took it in 2023.²⁵²



Changes in average ACT scores
***Maximum score of 36**

Year	Number of high school seniors taking test	Average score
2017	2,030,000	21.0
2018	1,915,000	20.8
2019	1,783,000	20.7
2020	1,670,000	20.6
2021	1,295,000	20.3
2022	1,350,000	19.8
2023	1,386,000	19.5

Source: NCES, 2024

249 Adams, G., Mazumder, A., Kates, E.R., & Dharanipathhi, M. (2024). *Evolution of standardized testing in the U.S.* Institute for Youth in Policy. https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/6580bf6203485cf15c72a4f1/6705e46d06efe526176bbe9_Evolution%20of%20Standardized%20%20Testing%20in%20the%20U.S..pdf

250 NCES. (2023). *Number, percentage distribution, and SAT mean scores of high school seniors taking the SAT, by sex, race/ethnicity, first language learned, and highest level of parental education: Selected years, 2017 through 2023*. Retrieved March 1, 2026 from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23_226.10.asp

251 NCES. (2024). *Number and percentage of graduates taking the ACT test; average scores and standard deviations, by sex and race/ethnicity; and percentage of test takers with selected composite scores and planned fields of postsecondary study: Selected years, 1995 through 2023*. Retrieved March 1, 2026 from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23_226.50.asp

252 ACT. (n.d.) *Understanding your ACT scores*. <https://www.act.org/content/act/en/products-and-services/the-act/scores/understanding-your-scores.html#249>

Looking Ahead: Building K-12 Opportunity and Success

It is essential to ensure that U.S. K-12 public schools are able to effectively serve all of the students who walk through their doors, and to prepare those students to continue into the postsecondary and workforce pathways that match their knowledge, skills, and interests. Yet in the wake of the pandemic, data show clearly that some students have more opportunity to do this than others, and that arbitrary student characteristics impact opportunities and access in ways that needlessly limit who can succeed at the next level.

Many trends are pointing in the wrong direction. Since the pandemic, school attendance remains down, funding and resource disparities in many cases are growing, and many student pathway challenges are still unsolved. The turn toward curriculum censorship and the transfer of public school funds to private schools — in service of initiatives that data suggests do not work even for students who participate — further limit student learning opportunities. There is a wide range of resources and evidence-based tools and guidance that can enable educators and policymakers to address many of these challenges — along with multiple instances nationally and in the South where this work has been

done well — but many current data show worsening trends that highlight concerns for future learning and workforce outcomes.

Addressing the challenges described here effectively can greatly increase the number of students who are successful in K-12 and at the next levels. Failing to address them may strengthen or even increase the downward trends visible in the data — particularly if the current presidential administration accomplishes its stated goal of dismantling the U.S. Department of Education and returning all authority over education spending to the states, which might mean distributing federal education funding to states in the form of block grants — consolidating separate federal programs such as IDEA and Title I — rather than through various formulas. While education in the United States has always been primarily a state responsibility, federal civil rights oversight has been a key aspect of public education and a major protection for students. Eliminating the government's role in education would allow for little to no federal oversight or accountability on how funds are used and could be devastating for certain student populations who rely on the oversight the federal government provides to ensure their civil rights are protected.



IV. POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

Postsecondary education represents an important step toward beneficial economic outcomes and serves as a key transition point between the education and workforce systems. For many students, pursuing a postsecondary degree or certification is a final educational opportunity to develop the skills and competencies they will need, as well as a first step in building a strong professional network and learning advanced analytical, technological, and critical thinking skills that will serve them in the job market and life. This stage also serves as a key transition in the cycle of social determinants discussed in this report, as students move from the age of minority and the most direct effects of childhood social and socioeconomic characteristics into adulthood and increased control over their pathways. This also means that postsecondary education reflects the last primary educational opportunity to intervene in ways that are aligned with the social determinants of education and provide supports to disrupt the vicious economic cycle we too often see limiting the workforce pool and reducing our collective ability to meet national needs.

Changes in Postsecondary Education

Postsecondary enrollment dropped during the pandemic. In fall 2020, rates of first-time undergraduate enrollment dropped 9% from fall 2019, and by 2022 approximately 1 million fewer students were enrolled in postsecondary education than just three years



earlier.²⁵³ This added to an ongoing trend of declining postsecondary enrollment, which peaked in 2010 with 21 million students before declining to 20 million in 2015 and 18.6 million in 2023.²⁵⁴ However, while overall enrollment peaked in 2010, undergraduate enrollment for Hispanic students, Asian students, and multiracial students has continued to grow. In contrast, undergraduate enrollment for Black, White, and American Indian/Alaska Native students has declined.

Mirroring national trends, college enrollment in the South has also decreased in every state except Texas and Delaware. On average, full-time college enrollment at postsecondary institutions dropped by about 9.75 percent across the SEF states between 2010 and 2020. Overall postsecondary enrollment in the U.S. has also decreased substantially in the past decade, raising concerns about postsecondary output and the ability to fill key workforce and service needs.²⁵⁵

253 NCES. (2024). College enrollment rates. *Condition of Education*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. Retrieved on October 25, 2025 from <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cpb>

254 Hanson, M. (2025). *College enrollment & student demographic statistics*. Education Data Initiative. <https://educationdata.org/college-enrollment-statistics>

255 Ibid.

Changes in college enrollment in the South, 2010-2020

State	Full-time college enrollment in postsecondary institutions (2020)	% change from 2010-2020
AL	249,009	-10.3%
AR	154,781	-12%
DE	57,022	3.2%
FL	999,223	-11.2%
GA	541,594	-4.8%
KY	261,751	-10.1%
LA	238,689	-9.5%
MD	329,092	-12.9%
MS	155,950	-13.4%
MO	333,470	-25%
NC	553,180	-5.6%
OK	184,218	-20.1%
SC	242,672	-5.6%
TN	308,710	-12.20
TX	1,567,017	2.0%
VA	546,280	-5.5%
WV	132,923	-12.80%
Total	6,855,581	Average % change: -9.75%

Source: Hanson, M., 2025

Postsecondary Mismatch

While access to high-quality and rigorous learning opportunities at the high school level is one key aspect of postsecondary preparation, understanding students' educational and workforce aspirations and helping to guide them into postsecondary programs that best fit their goals and abilities is another.²⁵⁶ However, research suggests students are not being effectively matched to postsecondary programs. One challenge already noted is that postsecondary options are often presented to students within a clear hierarchy, with four-year

institutions as the preferred option for the "best" students, two-year institutions as an inferior option, and CTE and vocational training as the pathway for students tracked out of other opportunities. This can negatively shape family and student perceptions.²⁵⁷

As students' interests and career aspirations differ, so too do the most beneficial postsecondary pathways for them. In addition to the cost difference discussed below, many training and certification programs and two-year degrees present students with opportunities to move more efficiently and directly into the workforce. Steering students seen as higher-performing or more academically successful toward four-year institutions ignores the fact that these students have wide variance in their interests and many may prefer a more focused and/or quicker pathway. Similarly, many students deemed to be lower-performing — setting aside that such a designation is often reflective of differential resources and variations in the social determinants of education rather than students' actual abilities — may nonetheless have interests that require more training, such as that provided during a four-year degree. An overemphasis on student achievement as a sorting mechanism for postsecondary guidance and opportunity creates a mismatch between student interests and potential and the opportunity they have to develop those skills.

Data show that more students are seeking alternatives to two- and four-year degrees. In the 2021-22 academic year, more postsecondary *certificates* were conferred by postsecondary institutions than *associate degrees* in the United States.²⁵⁸ This trend could signal that students are looking for more affordable postsecondary pathways that require less time to complete than traditional degree programs — only increasing the importance of matching them to best-fit options.

256 Perna, L., & Thomas, S. (2006). *A framework for reducing the college success gap and promoting success for all*. National Postsecondary Education Cooperative. <https://repository.upenn.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/58330335-00ab-4bf7-97d0-b75294e0a477/content>

257 E.g., U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2022, March). *Career and technical education: Perspectives on program strategies and challenges*. (GAO-22-104544). Retrieved March 1, 2026 from <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-22-104544>; Jackson, J. H., & Hasak, J. (2014). Look beyond the Label: Reframing, Reimagining, and Reinvesting in CTE. *American Educator*, 38(3), p. 35. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1044033>

258 NCES defines postsecondary certificates as "A formal award certifying the satisfactory completion of a postsecondary education program. Certificates can be awarded at any level of postsecondary education and include awards below the associate's degree level." see NCES. (2024). Postsecondary certificates and degrees conferred. *Condition of Education*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. Retrieved March 1, 2026 from <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cts>

The Expense of Postsecondary Education

Postsecondary education has become a more expensive endeavor for many families, and rising costs may discourage many students from seeking it. In the 2025-26 academic year, average tuition and fees for full-time students enrolled at in-state four-year colleges or universities was \$11,950. The average rose to \$31,880 for students attending out-of-state public institutions and \$45,000 for private four-year colleges and universities.²⁵⁹

These costs represent a substantial increase over the past 30 years, even when adjusting for inflation,²⁶⁰ raising concerns about the rapid growth in college costs. However, two-year institutions remain a much more affordable option.

Tuition and fees

Institution Type	Average, adjusted for inflation 1995-96	Average 2025-26	Percent increase 1995-96 to 2025-26	Total increase 2024-25 to 2025-26
Private four-year	\$25,820	\$45,000	74%	\$1,600
Public four-year (in-state)	\$5,940	\$11,950	101%	\$340
Two-year	\$2,810	\$4,150	48%	\$100

Source: College Board, 2025

In the South, annual tuition and fees at in-state, public four-year colleges and universities vary from an average of \$3,804 in Florida to \$15,702 in Virginia, while average costs for private institutions exceed \$30,000 in Maryland and North Carolina (although many Southern states are somewhat below average in postsecondary costs).²⁶¹

Costs for two-year public institutions can be as little as \$2,551 on average in North Carolina and \$3,634 in Georgia and only exceed \$6,000 in three states.²⁶²

Average tuition and fees at two- and four-year higher education institutions in the South

SEF State	4-year public (in-state)	4-year private (non- and for-profit)	2-year public
AL	\$11,253	\$18,738	\$5,264
AR	\$9,093	\$21,679	\$4,207
DE	\$9,937	\$13,785	*
FL	\$3,804	\$24,657	*
GA	\$5,781	\$26,478	\$3,634
KY	\$11,126	\$27,893	\$4,738
LA	\$9,101	\$25,923	\$4,312
MD	\$10,676	\$37,401	\$7,529
MS	\$9,064	\$19,410	\$3,981
MO	\$10,336	\$24,220	\$6,549
NC	\$7,622	\$30,087	\$2,551
OK	\$7,486	\$28,231	\$4,888
SC	\$12,159	\$27,436	\$6,457
TN	\$10,806	\$26,774	\$4,792
TX	\$8,142	\$26,630	\$4,523
VA	\$15,702	\$26,167	\$5,342
WV	\$8,797	\$21,861	\$5,122
SEF states average	\$8,521	\$26,234	\$4,548
National average:	\$9,079	\$31,094	\$4,969

Source: NCES, 2026

Note: These data are for “full-time undergraduate students” for the 2024-2025 academic year.
*No data available

UNCF also found that, on average, the cost of attending an HBCU is 28% less than the cost of attending a comparable non-HBCU institution — this is for HBCUs across the nation, but more than 90% of HBCUs are located in the South.²⁶³ UNCF also found that a higher percentage of Black students at HBCUs report that they feel financially secure (40%) than do Black students at other postsecondary institutions (29%).

259 College Board. (2025). *Trends in college pricing: Highlights*. <https://research.collegeboard.org/trends/college-pricing/highlights>

260 Ma, J., Pender, M., & Hu, X. (2025). *Trends in college pricing and student aid 2025*. College Board. <https://research.collegeboard.org/trends>

261 NCES.(2026). *IPEDS trend generator*. Retrieved on February 25, 2026, from <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/TrendGenerator/>

262 Ibid.

263 UNCF. (n.d.). *The numbers don't lie: HBCUs are changing the college landscape*. <https://uncf.org/the-latest/the-numbers-dont-lie-hbcus-are-changing-the-college-landscape>

The ROI of HBCUs

There are currently 103 HBCUs in the U.S., with 52 public and 51 private. Of those, 95 are located in the South.²⁶⁴

HBCUs are known for producing outsize results compared to their endowments. While White land-grant institutions received funding and land in 1862, HBCUs were granted only funding to be distributed as determined by the state, leaving them with pennies to the dollar compared to what White land-grant institutions have.²⁶⁵

The largest HBCU endowment is that of Howard University, at about \$1.03 billion in 2024, which put it 138th among U.S. institutions.²⁶⁶ The total combined endowment across all 103 accredited HBCUs was \$2.6 billion — less than one-third of 1 percent of the total endowments held across U.S. institutions, and less than the endowments of more than 50 individual U.S. colleges and universities.²⁶⁷

Yet in addition to producing an outsize percentage of degrees and professional training for Black students,

HBCUs greatly help local economies and the U.S. economy.²⁶⁸ Outcomes include:

- Every dollar of HBCU spending generates \$1.43 in local communities. This adds up to a total of \$16.5 billion in annual economic impact on communities in the South and across the nation.
- The employment impact of HBCUs across regional economies is more than 136,000 jobs. This is greater than companies like Dell or Intel and would rank within the top 50 companies for job creation.
- Due to HBCU-related spending and impact, every job created at an HBCU creates an additional 1.5 jobs off campus.

HBCUs also produce a high proportion of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) graduates. Black students are underrepresented as recipients of STEM degrees,²⁶⁹ but HBCUs confer 25% of STEM degrees for Black degree recipients despite enrolling only about 10% of Black college students. They also produce 40% of Black engineers.²⁷⁰

264 See <https://nces.ed.gov/COLLEGENAVIGATOR/?s=all&sp=4> for a listing of currently accredited HBCUs; note that different organizations may define and count the number of HBCUs in the U.S and U.S. territories slightly different.

265 E.g., Altman, M. (2024). *Miles to go: The state of education for Black students in America*. Southern Education Foundation. <https://southerneducation.org/what-we-do/milestogo2024/>; Allen, B. & Esters, L. (n.d.). *Historically Black land-grant universities: Overcoming barriers and achieving success*. https://cmsi.gse.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/HBLGUs_0.pdf

266 Per the National Association of College and University Business Officers (NACUBO). See, e.g., <https://www.commonfund.org/blog/a-closer-look-at-historically-black-colleges-and-universities-endowments>

267 For example, Pomona College in Claremont, CA has an endowment of \$2.99 billion, more than every HBCU combined, and Pomona College has only the 49th largest endowment among U.S. institutions.

268 McClendon, N., Kouaho, J.E., Njoku, N., Murray, L.V. & Humphreys, J. (2024). *Transforming futures: The economic engine of HBCUs*. Frederick D. Patterson Research Institute, UNCF

269 NCES. (2023). *Number and percentage distribution of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) degrees/certificates conferred by postsecondary institutions, by race/ethnicity, level of degree/certificate, and sex of student: Academic years 2012-13 through 2021-22*. Retrieved on March 17, 2026, from https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/data/digest/d23/tables/dt23_318.45.asp

270 UNCF. (2019). *By the numbers: How HBCUs stack up*. <https://uncf.org/the-latest/by-the-numbers-how-hbcus-stack-up>

Paying for Postsecondary Education

To afford postsecondary education, many students must use financial aid, such as student loans, grants, and scholarships. Increasingly, student loans have become a major part of how students and families pay for postsecondary education. An estimated 42.7 million students had federal student loans in 2024, compared to only 32.1 million in 2010²⁷¹ — although the average loans owed decreased between 2013-14 and 2023-24, from \$35,600 to \$29,560.²⁷²

The Pell Grant program is also an important part of postsecondary affordability, providing financial assistance for students from low-to-moderate-income households. The average Pell Grant award for students has not changed substantially in the past decade when adjusting for inflation: In 2024 the average grant was \$5,300, up from \$3,946 (\$5,203 adjusted for inflation) in 2014.²⁷³ The average Pell Grant award for students in the South in 2024 was \$5,499, compared to \$3,984 (\$5,253 adjusted for inflation) in 2014.²⁷⁴



Average Pell Grant award in the South 2023-2024

SEF state	Average Pell Grant amount (2023-24 Academic Year)
AL	\$5,574
AR	\$5,594
DE	\$4,912
FL	\$5,652
GA	\$5,657
KY	\$5,076
LA	\$5,696
MD	\$4,963
MS	\$5,824
MO	\$5,285
NC	\$6,072
OK	\$5,270
SC	\$5,378
TN	\$5,321
TX	\$5,444
VA	\$5,200
WV	\$5,132
SEF South average	\$5,499
National	\$5,300

Source: NCES, 2026

Although the average Pell Grant award rose over time, the cost of attendance at postsecondary institutions increased substantially.²⁷⁵ This means the Pell Grant covers far less of today's cost of attendance at postsecondary institutions than it did at the time of the program's inception.²⁷⁶

271 Hanson, M. (2026). *Student loan debt statistics*. Education Data Initiative. <https://educationdata.org/student-loan-debt-statistics/>. The Education Data Initiative also notes that "Considering student loan interest and loss of income, investing in a bachelor's degree can ultimately cost in excess of \$500,000." – see Hanson, M. (2026). *Average cost of college & tuition*. Education Data Initiative. <https://educationdata.org/average-cost-of-college>

272 College Board. (n.d.) *Trends in students aid: Highlights*. <https://research.collegeboard.org/trends/student-aid/highlights>

273 NCES. (n.d.). Financial aid: What is the average amount of Pell grants awarded to undergraduate students?. Retrieved on March 17, 2026, from <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/TrendGenerator/app/answer/8/36>

274 NCES. (n.d.). Average amount of Pell grants for students (limited by state). Retrieved on March 17, 2026, from <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/trendgenerator/app/answer/8/36?f=6%3D1%7C5%7C10%7C12%7C13%7C22%7C21%7C28%7C29%7C24%7C37%7C40%7C45%7C47%7C48%7C51%7C54>

275 Katsinas, S., Keeney, N., Bray, N., & Alexander, F. K. (2025). *The widening college access gap: Pell grant disinvestment and declining student enrollment in the South*. Southern Education Foundation. <https://southerneducation.org/publications/policybrief-widening-access-gap-south/>

276 Ibid.

Postsecondary Completion

Completing a postsecondary degree can substantially increase graduates' earnings across their lifetime, as discussed in depth in Chapter I of this report. However, many students who begin postsecondary degrees do not complete them. In the United States, bachelor's degrees are the most pursued degree at postsecondary institutions, with more than 2 million degrees conferred in 2022.²⁷⁷ Degrees in business and health care were the top two choices for bachelor's degree recipients. Among associate degree recipients, liberal arts (including sciences and humanities) and health professions were the most completed degrees.²⁷⁸



As with K-12 outcomes, college completion rates vary widely by students' race/ethnicity, gender, and age, raising further concerns that systemic issues are preventing more students from finishing their degrees and entering the workforce. Among college graduates earning bachelor's degrees in the U.S., 42.6% of Black students graduate within five years, compared with 55.4% of Hispanic students, 57.4% of multiracial students, 65.6% of White students, and 74.8% of Asian students.²⁷⁹ "Traditional" age college students are more likely to earn a bachelor's degree than "non-traditional" age students.²⁸⁰ White women earn the most bachelor's degrees, and women have earned more degrees than men since 2015.²⁸¹

On average, the six-year graduation rate for first-time, full-time undergraduate students at four-year postsecondary institutions was 64.5 percent and the three-year graduation rate at two-year institutions was 34.1 percent.²⁸² Students who do not graduate earn less money than graduates with bachelor's degrees and are more likely than college graduates to experience unemployment.²⁸³ Students who do not graduate may also still owe significant amounts in student loans.²⁸⁴ When surveyed, the most common reason students drop out was financial concerns, followed by motivation and life challenges and mental health challenges.²⁸⁵

277 National Center for Educational Statistics. (2024). Undergraduate degree fields. *Condition of Education*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. Retrieved April 1, 2026 from <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cta>

278 Ibid.

279 Hanson, M. (2025). *College graduation statistics*. Education Data Initiative. Retrieved April 16, 2026 from <https://educationdata.org/number-of-college-graduates>

280 Ibid.

281 Ibid.

282 NCES. (2024). Table 326.10. *Graduation rate from first institution attended for first-time, full-time bachelor's degree-seeking students at 4-year postsecondary institutions, by race/ethnicity, time to completion, sex, control of institution, and percentage of applications accepted: Selected cohort entry years, 1996 through 2017*. Retrieved March 1, 2026 from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d24/tables/dt24_326.10.asp; NCES (2023). Table 326.20. *Graduation rate from first institution attended within 150 percent of normal time for first-time, full-time degree/certificate-seeking students at 2-year postsecondary institutions, by race/ethnicity, sex, and control of institution: Selected cohort entry years, 2000 through 2019*. Retrieved March 1, 2026 from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23_326.20.asp. Note that two-year institutions commonly enroll high numbers of nontraditional students, students balancing competing priorities around family, employment, etc., and students from lower income families and/or who are lower-income adults. For this reason, the lower graduation rates at two-year institutions should not be seen as reflecting negatively on this class of institutions, but instead as a challenge that accompanies the work they do every day to serve a broad range of students who may be attending part time, integrating education into a number of other responsibilities, and so on.

283 Hanson, M. (2025). *College dropout rates*. Education Data Initiative. Retrieved April 16, 2026 from <https://educationdata.org/college-dropout-rates/>

284 Itzkowitz, M. (2024). *The college completion crisis fuels the student debt crisis*. The HEA Group. <https://www.theheagroup.com/blog/college-completion-crisis-fuels-student-debt-crisis/>; Altman, M. (2024). *Miles to go: The state of education for Black students in America*. Southern Education Foundation. <https://southerneducation.org/what-we-do/milestogo2024/>

285 Sallie Mae. (2024). *How America completes college*. https://www.salliemae.com/content/dam/slm/writtencontent/Research/SLM_How-America-Completes-College-Research-report.pdf

Data show certain student groups are more likely to be at risk of not completing their postsecondary education, including first-generation college students, low-income students, Black and Hispanic students, LGBTQ+ students, students who work off campus or work longer hours, and students who transfer schools.²⁸⁶ These variations in postsecondary completion are linked to challenges discussed in Chapter I, where disparities in degree completion connect to employment and income disparities, further contributing to these cycles of broad economic harm in communities across the South and the United States. Addressing these disparities, however, can bolster the economic vitality of communities through a diverse workforce that reflects the communities it serves.



“Brain Drain”

In recent years, and especially in the South, colleges and universities have been subjected to scrutiny over “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion” (DEI) initiatives and policies. In the South, states such as Florida, Alabama, and Texas have passed anti-DEI bills aimed at eliminating these policies in higher education. Florida ruled that state funds cannot be used to fund DEI initiatives,²⁸⁷ while Texas’s bill resulted in the closure of “DEI-affiliated” offices at public universities, causing employment uncertainty for many staff, and a loss of belonging and less supportive campus environments for many students.²⁸⁸ Furthermore, higher education institutions now face additional scrutiny about DEI practices at the federal level.²⁸⁹ For example, federally funded grants that fuel research and innovation in STEM fields have been reduced or cut completely as a consequence of language, policies, and programs considered to be related to DEI.²⁹⁰ Many project what is often called a “brain drain” in higher education, where valuable research and scholarship go unfunded and restrictive policies limit the number of talented students and scholars seeking to attend and work within U.S. colleges and universities, especially in the South.²⁹¹ Such an outcome would be highly contrary to what is needed to ensure an effective and functioning workforce. This brain drain could limit long-term workforce readiness for highly skilled jobs²⁹² and ultimately hamper the capacity for future innovation and economic output, particularly in the South, where many of these policies are most limiting.²⁹³

286 Ibid.

287 Florida Department of Education. (2024, January 17). *State Board of Education passes rule to permanently prohibit DEI in the Florida college system* [Press release]. <https://www.fldoe.org/newsroom/latest-news/state-board-of-education-passes-rule-to-permanently-prohibit-dei-in-the-florida-college-system.html>

288 Washington, J. (2024, May 14). *UT System shuts down 21 DEI offices and cuts hundreds of positions to comply with law*. KXAN. <https://www.kxan.com/news/texas-politics/senators-to-review-texas-universities-progress-with-dei-law/>

289 Binkley, C. (2025, March 14). *More than 50 universities face federal investigations under Trump's anti-DEI campaign*. PBS News. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/education/more-than-50-universities-face-federal-investigations-under-trumps-anti-dei-campaign>

290 Bedekovics, G. & Ragland, W. (2025). *Mapping federal funding cuts to U.S. colleges and universities*. Center for American Progress. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/mapping-federal-funding-cuts-to-us-colleges-and-universities/>; Rocha, A. (2025, September 16). *NIH grant cuts throw science into a 'downward spiral,' researchers and advocates say*. Georgia Recorder. <https://georgiarecorder.com/2025/09/16/nih-grant-cuts-throw-science-into-a-downward-spiral-researchers-and-advocates-say/>

291 Spitalniak, L. (2024, September 10). *Attacks on higher ed could portend Southern 'brain drain,' AAUP says*. Higher Ed Dive. <https://www.highereddive.com/news/higher-ed-attacks-portend-southern-brain-drain-aaup-states/726481/>

292 McGrath, E. (2025, April 7). *Vanishing advantage: The U.S. brain drain has begun*. The Century Foundation. <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/vanishing-advantage-the-u-s-brain-drain-has-begun/>

293 Ibid.

Looking Ahead: Ensuring Postsecondary Access and Fit

Millions of students move through the postsecondary system, through a wide range of pathways that can connect them to skills and employment that are critical for our nation. However, data raise serious questions about the ability of the postsecondary system to do this well enough in coming years: Mismatch between students' interests and their pathways and opportunities, extremely high costs at many institutions, and state and federal limitations to postsecondary institutions' ability to do their work and support all of their students well all lead to concerning projections for future outcomes. If not addressed, the challenges described in this chapter may only be exacerbated as postsecondary enrollment continues to change. Although postsecondary enrollment declined in the past 15 years and especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, enrollment numbers are predicted to increase through 2031. The number of undergraduate students, as well as the number of students enrolling in postbaccalaureate studies (programs that follow a bachelor's degree, such as graduate and professional degree programs), is projected to rise between 2021 and 2031.²⁹⁴ The number of conferred associate and bachelor's degrees is also forecast to rise consistently until 2031.²⁹⁵ As enrollment numbers increase, institutions will grapple with how to support all students who come from increasingly diverse backgrounds and have diverse needs as they pursue a postsecondary education. Ensuring that all students have a fair opportunity to be successful will be a critical area of focus for postsecondary education in the coming years.

Many of the challenges described in the projections of the past three chapters parallel one another across grade bands — issues of access and opportunity surface in many ways for students from early childhood

through postsecondary. One final mainstay is the other individuals inside the classroom: teachers and instructors. In the next chapter, we address the teacher workforce specifically, including key structures and policies that affect who teaches and, as will be discussed, create major and concerning teacher shortages, especially in key areas like special education and especially for students of color.



²⁹⁴ NCES. (2023). *Fast facts: Enrollment*. <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=98>; NCES. (2023). *Total postbaccalaureate fall enrollment in degree-granting postsecondary institutions, by attendance status, sex of student, and control of institution: 1970 through 2031*. Retrieved March 1, 2026 from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23_303.80.asp

²⁹⁵ NCES. (2023) *Degrees conferred by postsecondary institutions, by level of degree and sex of student: Selected years, 1869-70 through 2031-32*. Retrieved March 1, 2026 from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23_318.10.asp

V. TEACHER WORKFORCE

Research in both education and economics finds teachers to be the most important school-level factor on student achievement.²⁹⁶

However, across the United States right now, schools and communities face massive teacher shortages. These teacher shortages affect schools in all types of geographic areas — urban, suburban, and rural — with a 2023 study finding that rural schools in particular have struggled in recent years to fill teaching vacancies, particularly those that serve high rates of students living in poverty.²⁹⁷ This raises particular challenges in the South, a region that serves many such communities and students. The implications of teacher shortages nationally and in the South are clear: Schools without sufficient teachers cannot serve all of their students appropriately, face challenges in providing access to an appropriate range of coursework, and experience clear operational difficulties.²⁹⁸

In the years since the pandemic began, many districts have leaned into alternative certification programs. This includes provisional certification, which enables non-certified teachers to teach in schools while they work to obtain licensure — a scenario that is increasingly common in schools that serve the highest populations of students of color and students from low-income

families.²⁹⁹ Students receiving special education services and those living in rural and urban areas are more likely to have teachers trained through an alternative certification program. While scholars identify a number of challenges associated with schools that have high percentages of teachers who were trained through alternative certification programs, the increasing popularity of these programs is also a call to increase investment in them and to identify ways to improve them to better serve the many teachers, and particularly teachers of color, who pass through them.³⁰⁰

Teachers report that they leave the teaching profession for a variety of reasons, including a lack of administrative support, demanding workload, limited opportunities for collaboration, and difficulty motivating and managing students.³⁰¹ An analysis by the Economic Policy Institute (EPI) found that long-standing teacher shortages were exacerbated by the pandemic, and the report identifies what it calls the two most important drivers of shortages: 1. declining teacher pay, particularly when compared to other occupations for college graduates, and 2. increasing levels of workplace stress.³⁰² These hold particular concern in the South, which has lower average teacher pay — discussed in the next section — and a number of characteristics that increase teacher stress, discussed in the following section.

296 E.g., Sass, T. R., Hannaway, J., Xu, Z., Figlio, D. N., & Feng, L. (2010). Value added of teachers in high-poverty schools and lower poverty schools. *Journal of Urban Economics*, 72(2-3), 104–122. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jue.2012.04.004>

297 Ingersoll, R. M., & Tran, H. (2023). Teacher shortages and turnover in rural schools in the US: An organizational analysis. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 59(2), 396–431. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X231159922>

298 Wilhelm, A. G., Woods, D., & Kara, Y. (2021). Supporting change in novice alternative certification teachers' efficacy. *Psychology in the Schools*, 58(10), 1902–1918. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.22539>

299 Ibid.

300 Altman, M. (2024). *Miles to go: The state of education for Black students in America*. Southern Education Foundation. <https://southerneducation.org/what-we-do/milestogo2024/>

301 Carver-Thomas, D., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2019). The trouble with teacher turnover: How teacher attrition affects students and schools. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 27(36); Schonfeld, I. S., & Feinman, S. J. (2012). Difficulties of alternatively certified teachers. *Education and Urban Society*, 44(3), 215–246.

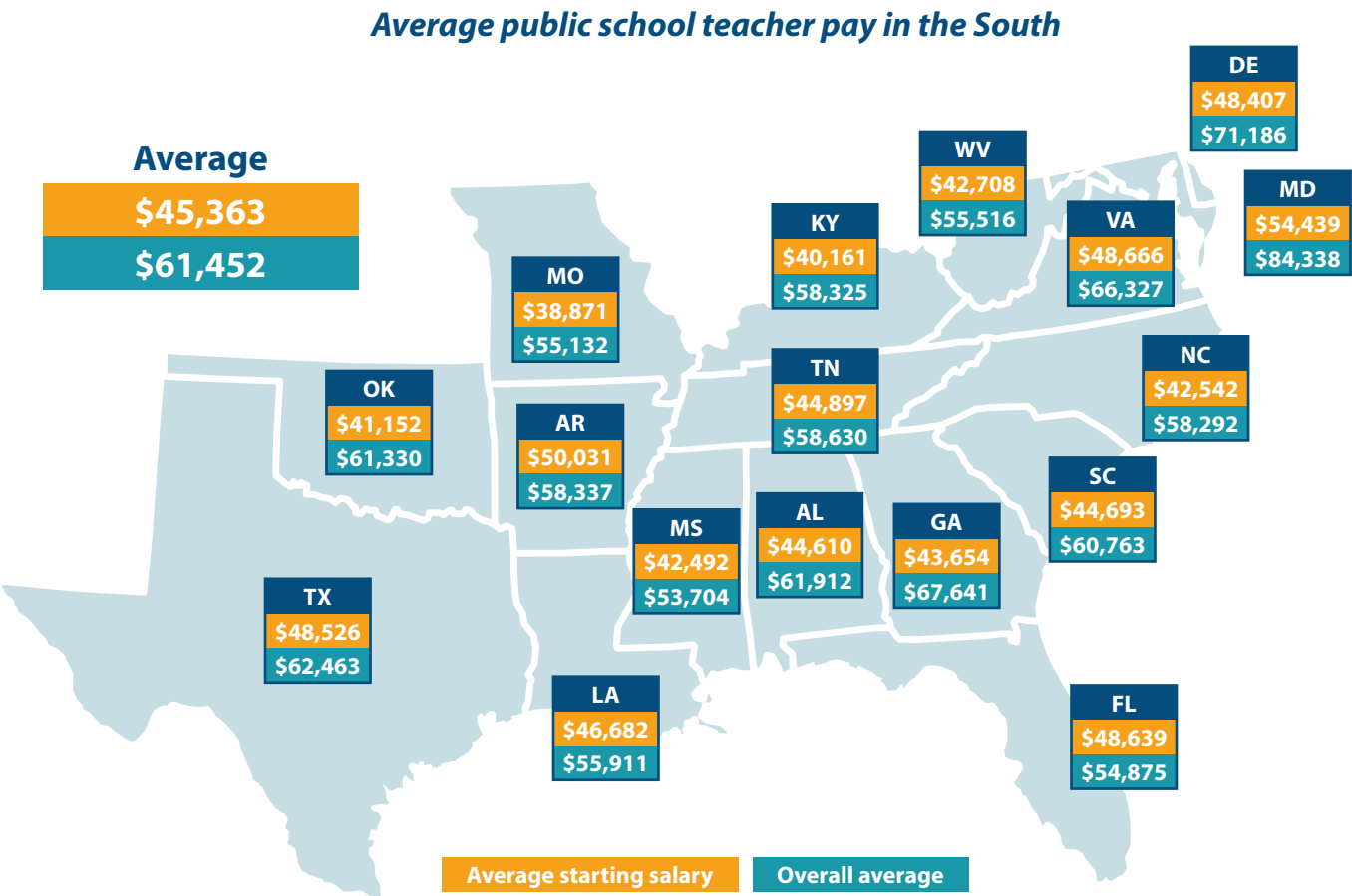
302 Schmitt, J. & deCourcy, K. (2022). *The pandemic has exacerbated a long-standing national shortage of teachers*. Economic Policy Institute. <https://www.epi.org/publication/shortage-of-teachers/>

Teacher Pay and Financial Challenges

In the SEF South, the average teacher salary is \$61,452, about \$10,000 lower than the U.S. average of \$72,030.³⁰³ Meanwhile, the median annual salary across all bachelor’s degree holders age 25 and older who worked full time in 2025 was approximately \$80,236, **11%** higher than the U.S. average teacher salary and about **30.5%** higher than the average teacher salary in the South.³⁰⁴ This does not include the even higher salaries for those with master’s degrees, which many teachers possess, at \$95,680 in 2025 — about 55% higher than

the average teacher salary in the South.³⁰⁵ The EPI report finds nationally that while the inflation-adjusted annual earnings of all full-time workers increased 2.6% between 2010 and 2019, those for teachers fell — 4.4% for high school teachers and 8.4% for elementary and middle school teachers.

Teacher pay has also not kept pace with housing costs. In a study of 71 districts located in the 50 largest cities in the United States, the National Center for Teacher Quality found that in 2019, before the pandemic, 18 districts had been unaffordable for beginning teachers with bachelor’s degrees and 11 were unaffordable for beginning teachers with master’s



Source: Walker, T., 2025
Note: Data from 2023-2024 academic year

303 Walker, T. (2025, April 9). *The state of teacher pay*. National Education Association. <https://www.nea.org/nea-today/all-news-articles/state-teacher-pay>

304 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2025). *Unemployment rates and earnings by educational attainment*. Retrieved March 1, 2026 from <https://www.bls.gov/emp/tables/unemployment-earnings-education.htm>

305 Ibid.

degrees, but that these numbers have increased to 39 and 34, respectively. Further, no districts in the sample were unaffordable for teachers with a master's degree and 10 years of experience in 2019, but by 2025 this number was eight.³⁰⁶

Aside from the inequitable pay alone, teachers face enormous student loan debt with major financial implications. The Learning Policy Institute (LPI) finds that more than 60% of full-time teachers in U.S. public schools — about 2.1 million teachers — have taken out student loans, and that about 37% of all teachers — more than a third — are still repaying those loans, including nearly 20% of teachers older than 60. Further, more than 1 in 9 teachers still owe their *full* student loan balance. Teachers also reported loan payments that were higher than the average among all student loan borrowers.³⁰⁷

These loans have direct effects on teachers' well-being and on their ability to do their jobs. LPI found that more than a third of teachers who have taken out student loans (36.7%) reported needing to work multiple jobs because of those loans, and 60% of teachers with loans reported high or very high levels of stress due to their debt. Further, there are clear racial disparities in student loan debt that affect Black teachers most notably — Black teachers have the highest rates of loan borrowing, at 71%, and of in-process loan repayment, at 60%. More than 30% of Black teachers — almost three times the percentage across all teachers — still owe their entire student loan balance. This has major implications for the certification, retention, and well-being of Black teachers, which we discuss in more detail in a prior report.³⁰⁸



Teacher Stress

The second driver of teacher shortages is the stressful work environment faced by teachers. Outside of the stress teachers report from student loans, the Economic Policy Institute found that COVID-19 “greatly exacerbated” teacher stress and that by 2022 teachers were more than twice as likely as other working adults to report “frequent job-related stress,”³⁰⁹ with more than 70% of teachers reporting this experience. Teachers were also more likely than other professionals to report burnout and symptoms of depression, and twice as likely as other professionals to report that they were “not coping well with job-related stress.”

Beyond the pandemic, however, the environment in which teachers teach, particularly in the South, is becoming not only stressful but untenable. As noted above, since the late 2010s, teachers have worked in an increasingly difficult and politically fraught system in which their roles and expectations are often extremely unclear,³¹⁰ even legally. Beginning at the end of the decade, continuing through the pandemic and up

306 Bowser, K. (2025, May 8). *Priced out: The growing challenges of teacher pay and housing costs*. National Council on Teacher Quality. <https://www.nctq.org/research-insights/priced-out-the-growing-challenge-of-teacher-pay-and-housing-costs/>

307 García, E., Wei, W., Patrick, S.K., Leung-Gagné, M., & DiNapoli, M.A. (2023). *In debt: Student loan burdens among teachers*. Learning Policy Institute. https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/media/4180/download?inline&file=Student_Loan_Burdens_Among_Teachers_REPORT.pdf

308 Altman, M. (2024). *Miles to go: The state of education for Black students in America*. Southern Education Foundation. <https://southerneducation.org/what-we-do/milestogo2024/>

309 Schmitt, J. & deCourcy, K. (2022). *The pandemic has exacerbated a long-standing national shortage of teachers*. Economic Policy Institute. <https://www.epi.org/publication/shortage-of-teachers/>; the latter statistic draws on a prior study by the RAND Corporation cited in the report.

310 E.g., Meehan, K., Friedman, J., Magnusson, T., & Baêta, S. *Banned in the USA: State laws supercharge book suppression in schools*. PEN America. <https://pen.org/report/banned-in-the-usa-state-laws-supercharge-book-suppression-in-schools/>



pushback on these restrictions to what can be taught in their classrooms, and that many educators, families, and community members view such legislation as direct educational censorship.³¹²

Shortages Across School Types and the Historical Decline in Teachers

As of 2022, 1 in 10 public schools reported that more than 10% of their teaching positions were vacant. This includes 15% of schools in high-poverty neighborhoods, but also 8% — almost 1 in 12 — in low-poverty neighborhoods.³¹³ In other words, while schools serving lower-income families are more affected, teacher shortages affect schools serving higher-income families as well. Similarly, 13% of schools enrolling more than 75% students of color reported at least 10% of their teaching positions were vacant, but so did 9% of schools enrolling 26-75% students of color and 7% of schools enrolling less than 25% students of color — still more than 1 in 15. This is a system-wide issue.

Shortages are particularly glaring in the case of special education teachers. Even before the pandemic, data showed that more than 10% of special education teachers in many states were uncertified, and that this number was close to 10% nationally.³¹⁴ In the 2022-23 school year, 21% of schools reported experiencing at least one special education vacancy.³¹⁵ A post-pandemic analysis of 2021-22 job posting data in Washington state found that 66% of job openings for elementary teachers were removed in two weeks, but only 38 percent of special education postings were, and that even eight

311 E.g., Southern Poverty Law Center. (2023, June 22). *Georgia teacher fired for reading children's book about acceptance in class*. <https://www.splcenter.org/resources/stories/georgia-teacher-fired-reading-childrens-book-about-acceptance-class/>; Lyden, M. (2024, February 22). *State Board of Education in Georgia affirms decision to fire teacher over reading 'My Shadow Is Purple'*. 11Alive. <https://www.11alive.com/article/news/education/decision-to-fire-teacher-katie-rinderle-upheld-reading-book-my-shadow-is-purple/85-fa9690f4-0329-4766-ba45-44eafee210e8>

312 Altman, M. (2024). *Miles to go: The state of education for Black students in America*. Southern Education Foundation. <https://southerneducation.org/what-we-do/milestogo2024/>

313 Schmitt, J. & deCourcy, K. (2022). *The pandemic has exacerbated a long-standing national shortage of teachers*. Economic Policy Institute. <https://www.epi.org/publication/shortage-of-teachers/>

314 Peyton, D. & Acosta, K. (2022). *Understanding special education teacher shortages*. National Association of State Boards of Education. <https://www.nasbe.org/understanding-special-education-teacher-shortages/>

315 Gilmour, A., Mason-Williams, L., & Bettini, E. (n.d.) *How the special education teacher shortage affects students with LD, and what to do about it*. Learning Disabilities Association of America. <https://ldaamerica.org/how-the-special-education-teacher-shortage-affects-students-with-ls-and-what-to-do-about-it/>

weeks after posting, 23 percent of special education postings remained open.³¹⁶

Data show a decline overall in interest in teaching as a career. In 2000, 11% of incoming college freshmen indicated that they intended to study education. By 2018, this number had fallen to 4.3%.³¹⁷ This evidence of declining interest is also borne out in both the number of postsecondary students acquiring teaching degrees and the enrollment and completion numbers for teacher preparation programs.

In 1970, more education degrees were awarded than business, health, or social sciences degrees. In 2018, education represented the fewest awarded degrees among that set. Further, in 1970, more than 175,000 education degrees were awarded. In 2018-19, this number was less than 85,000.³¹⁸ Since the pandemic started, this trend has been somewhat interrupted — the number of education degrees awarded increased in 2019-20 (by about a thousand) and again, substantially, in 2020-21 (by almost 4,500). As of 2021-22, the most recent year for which data are available, this number has stayed about the same, dropping by less than a tenth of a percent. In addition to these data on student interest and education degrees awarded, a 2019 analysis estimated that “about half of teachers who have degrees in teaching do not teach.”³¹⁹

Enrollment in teacher preparation programs also dropped in the decade leading up to the pandemic. While there were rises and falls, between 2012-13 and 2018-19 total enrollment in teacher preparation programs declined nearly 20%, from more than 675,000

to less than 550,000.³²⁰ Further, this period actually saw a substantial *increase* in enrollment in alternative teacher education programs, which effectively doubled, while enrollment in traditional programs declined more than 30%.³²¹

Following the pandemic, there was a jump in enrollment to nearly 590,000 in 2019-20 — about the same as it had been in the 2015-16 and 2016-17 academic years. This number stayed about steady in the following year, increasing very slightly to about 591,000 in 2020-21³²², the last year for which data are available. Whether the post-pandemic increase is sustainable remains to be seen, but even with that substantial jump, enrollment across all types of teacher preparation programs in 2020-21 was nearly 13% lower than in 2012-13. Enrollment in traditional teacher preparation programs was still almost 30% lower.

Looking Ahead: Changing These Trends

Teacher shortages are very real and have highly concerning implications for schools of all characteristics across the United States. Reduced interest in teaching as a profession, lower numbers of postsecondary students attaining education degrees, financial stress, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the curricular censorship and heavy-handed attacks currently being used to silence teachers have created a difficult environment for current and future teachers. This hurts the students and schools they serve. Further, these shortages particularly affect rural schools, which are very common in the South.

316 Goldhaber, D., Falken, G., Theobald, R., & Goodman Young, M. (2024). A better measure of teacher shortages: Web scraping job postings pinpoints challenges in real time. *Education Next*, 24(4), 32-37. <https://www.educationnext.org/a-better-measure-of-teacher-shortages/>

317 Schmitt, J. & deCourcy, K. (2022). *The pandemic has exacerbated a long-standing national shortage of teachers*. Economic Policy Institute. <https://www.epi.org/publication/shortage-of-teachers/>

318 NCES. (2023). *Bachelor's degrees conferred by postsecondary institutions, by field of study: Selected academic years, 1970-71 through 2021-22*. Retrieved March 1, 2026 from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23_322.10.asp

319 McVey, K.P. & Trinidad, J. (2019). *Nuance in the noise: The complex reality of teacher shortages*. Bellwether Education Partners. <https://bellwether.org/publications/nuance-noise-complex-reality-teacher-shortages/>

320 NCES. (2024). *Number and percentage distribution of persons who were enrolled in and who completed a teacher preparation program, by program type: Academic years 2012-13 through 2020-21*. Retrieved June 16, 2026 from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23_209.02.asp

321 Ibid.

322 Ibid

However, there are a number of approaches that have been shown to be effective in developing, recruiting, and retaining teachers that can help mitigate these challenges.

Pipeline/GYO/Residency Programs. One key strategy that can help address teacher shortages is the implementation of processes and programs that can connect more potential teacher candidates with opportunities in the field of education. There are a number of approaches to this work, including building more robust pipelines from K-12 and postsecondary education into teaching, the creation of grow-your-own (GYO) teacher programs, teacher residency programs, and a host of related initiatives.³²³ These pathways should be accessible to a diverse range of potential educators and should equip teachers with skills to implement culturally informed, liberatory educational practices. Along with partnerships with institutions of higher education, school districts, and community organizations, these programs can open the teaching profession to more individuals who may be excellent teacher candidates — who can bring a deep understanding of their communities and future students to the profession — but who may otherwise not have thought of themselves as future teachers.³²⁴

Changing hiring practices. Developing welcoming and inclusive hiring practices and processes — which often requires revising traditional approaches to hiring in very intentional ways — is a key way to attract a broader and more diverse range of teachers, and to create a teacher

workforce that is representative of the communities that schools and districts serve. Research shows that broadening the teacher workforce in this way can lead to improved academic and behavioral outcomes as well as increased student social and emotional learning, in addition to opening up a larger pool of potential educators who can fill open positions.³²⁵ Some strategies for doing this include building or strengthening community outreach programs (as well as pipelines, as noted), including through partnerships with community organizations, local colleges (and particularly HBCUs, Hispanic-serving institutions and other minority-serving institutions, and community colleges), and current teachers and local families; revising job descriptions to highlight a commitment to representation and to reflect updated framing and language that can attract more high-quality candidates; and creating diverse hiring and interviewing panels that can ensure a fair and open hiring process.³²⁶ While these processes require careful, thoughtful, and well-informed work to do correctly, there are many resources and toolkits available to help support this work.³²⁷

*Quality professional development.*³²⁸ By the time of the pandemic, a substantial body of work on high-quality teacher professional development — also called professional learning — was already available, but many teachers continue to lack access to these opportunities. Research consistently shows that high-quality professional learning has positive impacts on both teacher practice and student outcomes.³²⁹ There

323 Altman, M. (2024). *Miles to go: The state of education for Black students in America*. Southern Education Foundation. <https://southerneducation.org/what-we-do/milestogo2024/>

324 Ibid.

325 Rafa, A. & Roberts, M. (2020) *Building a diverse teacher workforce*. Education Commission of the States. https://www.ecs.org/wp-content/uploads/Building_a_Diverse_Teacher_Workforce.pdf

326 Hudson, L., Abdullah, T., & Altman, M. (2026). *Fostering fair and just hiring practices in our schools: A toolkit for district leaders*. Equity Assistance Center-South at the Southern Education Foundation. <https://eacsouth.org/guides-and-tools/from-recruitment-to-belonging-the-educator-pipeline-series/>

327 E.g.,: Saunders, R. & Skinner, A. (2025) *Addressing teacher shortages: Insights from four states*. Learning Policy Institute. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/blog/addressing-teacher-shortages-insights-four-states>

328 Darling-Hammond, L., Hyler, M. E., & Gardner, M. (2017). *Effective teacher professional development (research brief)*. Learning Policy Institute. https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Effective_Teacher_Professional_Development_BRIEF.pdf

329 E.g., Hill, H., Papay, J., Schwartz, N., Johnson, S., Freitag, E., Donohue, K., Berry, R., III, Loeb, S., Anderson, M., Baker, M., Cato Czupryk, B., Coddington, C., Ehlman, K., Maus, A., Meili, L., Paek, P., Romansky, C., Taylor-Perryman, R., Vu, H., Worthman, S., & Williamson-Zerwic, B. (2021). *A learning agenda for improving teacher professional learning at scale*. Research Partnership for Professional Learning. <https://rpplpartnership.org/external-resource/learning-agenda-for-improving-teacher-professional-learning/>

are a number of excellent resources for the creation and implementation of effective professional learning programs, which should differ from less effective traditional “one-off” professional development by being cohesive, ongoing, job-embedded, and culturally responsive, and should include tools and practical examples while focusing on teacher agency and growth.

Teacher retention practices. Many teachers leave the profession, particularly when they feel less supported by their schools and less engaged in their work,³³⁰ and, as noted above, when they experience high stress levels and other well-being challenges. In the South, these issues are often augmented by lower-than-average pay for teachers. In order to retain high-quality educators, it is important to understand teachers’ levels of job satisfaction and to identify and address their needs. Measuring teachers’ levels of engagement through tools like surveys³³¹ and focus groups³³² and then following up with targeted action plans can improve retention and school climate. Mentorship programs, recognition opportunities, and the creating of effective support networks are also excellent strategies for improving teacher retention — but teachers’ job satisfaction can be based on many factors, and it is key for school and district administration to continue to work to understand how to best attend to their satisfaction and well-being.

Interest in teaching as a profession and the number of education degrees being awarded have both decreased substantially in the 21st century, and since 2020 the pandemic has greatly exacerbated both teacher shortages and stress levels among current teachers. Beyond direct pandemic effects, thus-far-successful attempts to take away teachers’ autonomy have limited their ability to teach accurate content to their students, threatening their jobs and even their licensure and causing them in many cases to choose between losing

their livelihoods or remaining quiet to keep them. These threats occur everywhere, but particularly in the South, and research shows that teacher shortages affect rural schools most, suggesting that rural communities in the South stand to lose the most if these many challenges are not addressed and trends continue as they are. If we are to return the teacher workforce to an adequate level, we must improve teacher pipelines and training, revise hiring practices, ensure that teachers receive the support they need, and seek out more and nontraditional teacher candidates. If we are to keep the teachers we do have, we must address issues of teacher well-being highlighted and exacerbated by the pandemic, and we must stop the attempts to censor curriculum that prevent students from learning and teachers from teaching.

Addressing these issues may enable us to turn around the current teacher workforce trends before more damage is done to students’ ability to learn in the United States. However, if the declines in the teacher workforce and growing teacher shortages are not addressed, there may soon be few enough teachers that some schools cease to fully function as they lose the ability to offer all needed subjects, support their students, and conduct their business. Further, if we do address these trends but continue to largely ignore teacher well-being needs, we would expect continuing reductions in the effectiveness of teaching and learning in U.S. schools.



330 Mack, J.C., Johnson, A., Jones-Rincon, A., Tsatenawa, V., & Howard, K. (2019). Why do teachers leave? A comprehensive occupational health study evaluating intent to quit in public school teachers. *Journal of Applied Biobehavioral Research*, 24(1), e12160. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jabr.12160>

331 Eynon, B., & Iuzzini, J. (2020). *Teaching and learning toolkit: A research-based guide to building a culture of teaching and learning excellence*. Achieving the Dream. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED610199>

332 Ikemoto, G., Taliaferro, L., Fenton, B., & Davis, J. (2014). *Great principals at scale: Creating district conditions that enable all principals to be effective*. New Leaders. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED556346>

VI. TRENDS AND TECH: CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE DIGITAL LANDSCAPE

Among all of the changes in the South's post-pandemic landscape, perhaps none is more salient than the increased integration of technology in our daily lives. Virtual meetings and even virtual doctor visits, digital restaurant menus, QR codes for more information, and app-based access to the basic systems of our world predominate.

So, too, has the use of technology become increasingly important and widespread in education. SEF works directly to increase technology access for more students, and this report in no way argues against the use of educational technology — often called EdTech — in schools or concludes that technology is harmful; in fact, the research addressed below suggests that many students' technology access is far too limited. Rather, the data included here highlight the complexities of technology use: Technology use in schools and classrooms is not and cannot be neutral; it can create issues of access,³³³ sometimes prohibitive, for many students, and this can further contribute to systemic disparities that needlessly limit many students' opportunities both to enter the workforce and to master the technologies and skills they will need to use effectively when there.

For this reason, one question asked in this chapter is: Who has — and who does not have — access to necessary educational technology? The data also raise a second question: As more educational and economic functions can be *managed* by technology (e.g., run by

AI, managed by digital systems with little to no human oversight or intervention), will all students have enough access to *humans*?³³⁴ Ultimately, this is a question not only of whether students are able to access technology, but whether the technology they access is being employed thoughtfully and effectively in service of meaningful learning.



333 Lu, A., Gilbert, E., Jocelyn, B., Waymack, N., & Loeb, S. (2025). *What's in a contract? How outcomes-based contracting reshapes school district–vendor relationships*. Stanford SCALE Initiative.

334 E.g., Adair, A. (2023). Teaching and learning with AI: How artificial intelligence is transforming the future of education. XRDS: Crossroads, *The ACM Magazine for Students*, 29(3), 7–9.; Shah, P. (2023). *AI and the future of education: Teaching in the age of artificial intelligence*. John Wiley & Sons.; Kim, J., Merrill, K., Xu, K., & Sellnow, D. D. (2020). My teacher is a machine: Understanding students' perceptions of AI teaching assistants in online education. *International Journal of Human–Computer Interaction*, 36(20), 1902–1911.

Technology adequacy, availability, affordability, accessibility, and application are all aspects associated with social determinants such as students' physical environment, geography, and socioeconomic factors that affect their experiences in school. The full scale of questions around digital access, digital equity, developing technology, and where this may lead us educationally and economically in the next decade is far too broad and complex for a report chapter and would require a full report itself — likely of much greater length than this one — to fully address. This section instead presents an overview of some of the primary educational and economic questions raised by the post-pandemic technological shift and concludes with a consideration of their implications for students and for the projections contained in this report.

Digital Equity: Beyond the 'Digital Divide'

It is an understatement that the pandemic increased our reliance on technology. In 2019, the company Zoom posted an annual revenue of about \$620 million. In 2020, Zoom posted an annual revenue of \$2.6 billion, more than four times as much. By 2024, its revenue was \$4.66 billion. Zoom averaged about 10 million daily meeting participants in December 2019. By May 2020, that number was around 200 million, and by June 2020 it was 300 million *per day*.³³⁵ As a comparison point, the 2020 U.S. Census counted the total population of the United States at about 331.5 million.

Yet, as of 2023, Forbes reported that 42 million Americans still lacked broadband internet access,³³⁶ noting both cost and accessibility as key factors. Further, the Pew Research Center found that of those families who do have high-speed internet access, more than a third of families making less than \$30,000 per year reported in 2021 that they had experienced difficulty paying for their internet service. This is also true of a quarter of families making between \$30,000 and \$50,000, but only of 4% of families making more than \$75,000.³³⁷ In the South, a post-COVID report by the Mississippi Center for Justice describes families driving between houses or to churches, or even sitting in hotel parking lots, to access broadband so they could do their digital school work, as well as some students who had to complete entire assignments from their phones.³³⁸ (The Pew study found that among families making less than \$30,000, the percentage of those reporting trouble paying for phone service was even higher than the percentage struggling to pay for high-speed internet.)³³⁹

These statistics are examples of what many call the “digital divide”: disparities in access to technologies affected by characteristics like class, race, and geography that were already very salient in the 2010s but — as illustrated — had enormous implications for educational opportunity and access during the pandemic and continuing through to today as society has become increasingly digital.³⁴⁰

The pandemic heightened awareness of digital equity gaps and created urgency around addressing these

335 Curry, D. (2026). *Zoom revenue and usage statistics (2026)*. Business of Apps. <https://www.businessofapps.com/data/zoom-statistics/>

336 Campisi, M, & Bailie, K. (2023). *Millions of Americans are still missing out on broadband access and leaving money on the table – here's why*. Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/advisor/personal-finance/millions-lack-broadband-access/>. There is also a disparity in broadband access between urban and rural areas. Data from the U.S. Census show that households in urban areas were more likely to have broadband access than those in rural areas. United States Census Bureau. (2024). *Computer and internet use in the United States: 2021* [Press Release]. <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2024/computer-internet-use-2021.html>

337 McClain, C. (2021). *34% of lower-income home broadband users have had trouble paying for their service amid COVID-19*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/06/03/34-of-lower-income-home-broadband-users-have-had-trouble-paying-for-their-service-amid-covid-19/>

338 Mississippi Center for Justice. (2022). *COVID-19 & education impact report*. <https://mscenterforjustice.org/covid19educationimpactreport/>

339 McClain, C. (2021). *34% of lower-income home broadband users have had trouble paying for their service amid COVID-19*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/06/03/34-of-lower-income-home-broadband-users-have-had-trouble-paying-for-their-service-amid-covid-19/>

340 Digital access gaps also caused challenges in other areas, like special education, both nationally and in the South. For more on the range of impacts, see, e.g., Golden, A. R., Srisarajivakul, E. N., Hasselle, A. J., Pfund, R. A., & Knox, J. (2023). What was a gap is now a chasm: Remote schooling, the digital divide, and educational inequities resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 52, 101632.; Mississippi Center for Justice. (2022). *COVID-19 & education impact report*. <https://mscenterforjustice.org/covid19educationimpactreport/>

disparities. Today, nearly all public schools report having high-speed internet available to students across all school buildings,³⁴¹ but the actual functional speed of internet connections varies widely³⁴² and can present a particular challenge for rural students. Further, many homes still experience challenges to computer access and internet connectivity that create highly inequitable learning opportunities.³⁴³ Students from low-income families are less likely to report having computer access at home than those from middle-to-higher-income families,³⁴⁴ and the children of college-educated parents are 20 percentage points more likely to have home internet access than children of parents without a high school degree — again extending the economics-and-education cycle described earlier.³⁴⁵

Focusing only on this access gap, though, misses a second key digital equity challenge: Educators and scholars also raise important sociopolitical questions about how technology is being used, and for whom.³⁴⁶ Prior to the pandemic, studies had already noted disparities in technology implementation and educational alignment — for example, that students in schools serving higher-income families are often asked to use technology for things like research and problem-solving, while students in schools serving low-income families may often be asked to focus more on drilling basic skills.³⁴⁷ Studies of remote instruction completed during the COVID-19 pandemic suggested similar

patterns.³⁴⁸ The question of digital equity in schools, then, is shaped both by students' level of access to high-quality digital tools and by the opportunities they have to use those tools in support of high-quality learning. This is particularly important given that the effective use of the tools is itself a key skill for many future workforce opportunities.

One way this disparity manifests is through education funding structures — especially grants and Title I dollars supporting high-poverty schools — which shape technology access and use in students' education. The short-term and often restricted funds accessible to schools serving high proportions of students from low-income families may not provide the flexibility available in many schools with more financial resources³⁴⁹ — again, a reflection of how social determinants shape educational access and opportunity. Short-term, restricted funds may be used by schools for a wide array of technologies and digital tools, but with less capacity to ensure that they are well-aligned to instruction, of high-quality, and used appropriately with students, and often with additional requirements for provision of particular services that require more contracting with outside vendors. In contrast, schools with access to longer-term unrestricted funds have more opportunity to take time needed for a high level of implementation support for a smaller number of high-quality tools that can be provided more thoughtfully to students and create more targeted opportunities for learning.

341 NCES. (2024). *School Pulse Panel (SPP): December 2024 learning strategies and recovery report*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. Retrieved March 1, 2026 from <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/spp/results.asp#school-facilities-dec24-chart-2>

342 Lai, J., & Widmar, N. O. (2021). Revisiting the digital divide in the COVID-19 era. *Applied economic perspectives and policy*, 43(1), 458-464.

343 Reynolds, R., Aromi, J., McGowan, C., & Paris, B. (2022). Digital divide, critical-, and crisis-informatics perspectives on K-12 emergency remote teaching during the pandemic. *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, 73, 1665–1680. <https://asistdl.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/asi.24654>

344 U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, NCES, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), various years, 2003–2015 Mathematics Assessments, 2009–2015 Reading Assessments, and 2009–2015 Science Assessments. Retrieved March 1, 2026 from https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/sq_computer

345 NCES. (2023). Children's internet access at home. *Condition of Education*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. Retrieved July 31, 2025, from <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cch/home-internet-access>

346 e.g., Liu, K., Tschinkel, R., & Miller, R. (2024). Digital equity and school leadership in a post-digital world. *ECNU Review of Education*, 7(3), 762-783.

347 e.g., Garland, V. E., & Wotton, S. E. (2001–2002). Bridging the digital divide in public schools. *Journal of Educational Technology Systems*, 30(2), 115–124. <https://doi.org/10.2190/C22F-8TJ3-9QPY-0G8V>; Valadez, J. R., & Duran, R. (2007). Redefining the digital divide: Beyond access to computers and the Internet. *The High School Journal*, 90(3), 31–44. <https://doi.org/10.1353/hsj.2007.0013>

348 Barnum, M., & Bryan, C. (2020, June 26). *America's great remote-learning experiment: What surveys of teachers and parents tell us about how it went*. Chalkbeat. <https://www.chalkbeat.org/2020/6/26/21304405/surveys-remote-learning-coronavirus-success-failure-teachers-parents>

349 E.g., McCann, C. (2011). *Study of Title I expenditures reveals unique needs of low-income districts*. New America. <https://www.newamerica.org/insights/study-of-title-i-expenditures-reveals-unique-needs-of-low-income-districts/>

The Southern Education Foundation prioritizes work to improve technology funding and access for more students as a primary issue of focus. This includes direct work with schools and districts, such as through our Center for Outcomes Based Contracting, which supports cohorts of districts in learning to work with external service providers to tie payments for services to measurable student outcomes. SEF has also worked directly in the legal and public policy space to decrease financial and resource gaps in technology access, including filing a 2024 amicus brief heard before the U.S. Supreme Court as part of a successful effort to reinforce “E-Rate” protections that prevent corporations from overcharging public schools, local libraries, and other public institutions for broadband services.³⁵⁰ Our partners have also been involved in other work at the federal level, including involvement in developing priorities for incorporating artificial intelligence (AI) in improving educational outcomes.³⁵¹

Technology, Bias, and School Discipline

In addition to the question of how students interact with advanced technology, serious questions exist about how advanced technology interacts with students. Research in many of the areas reflected in SEF’s Social Determinants of Education framework finds that so-called “neutral” algorithms often learn and reflect the bias already present in current and historical data. For example, one key finding is that algorithms used in the criminal justice system to assess characteristics of defendants to ascertain their level of flight risk and threat to others before trial often “learn” from past criminal justice data skewed with racial disparities. As a result, they often assign higher levels of bail to defendants of color than to White defendants accused of the same crimes, or deny bail as an option entirely, because the algorithms have learned from data that reflect overpunishment and overcriminalization of Black and Brown Americans compared to White Americans.³⁵² This means that a technology that is often viewed as a “neutral” way to determine risk as compared to the potentially biased determinations of individual judges — which is well documented as a clear source of the disparities just noted — can actually *systematize* those disparities by incorporating them into the machine-learning processes it draws on in assessing that risk.³⁵³

It is imperative to ensure that technology used in schools does not do this. There are already many examples of surveillance technology being used to watch students in and out of school, to monitor their

350 Southern Education Foundation. (2025, February 25). *Supreme Court upholds protections for schools and libraries in broadband access case: SEF supported case to enforce E-Rate Program rules* [News Release]. <https://southerneducation.org/in-the-news/erate/>

351 U.S. Department of Education. (2025, July 22). *U.S. Department of Education issues guidance on artificial intelligence use in schools, proposes additional supplemental priority* [Press Release]. <https://www.ed.gov/about/news/press-release/us-department-of-education-issues-guidance-artificial-intelligence-use-schools-proposes-additional-supplemental-priority>

352 E.g., Hill, S. A. I. (2021). Bail reform and the (false) racial promise of algorithmic risk assessment. *UCLA L. Rev.*, 68, 910.; Citron, D. K. (2024). The surveilled student. *Stan. L. Rev.*, 76, 1439.

353 These disparities, and the way in which they can be systematized by “neutral” algorithms, are well-documented: For example, Black men receive 13% longer sentences on average (and Hispanic men 11% longer sentences on average) than White men, and Black adults are imprisoned at about 5 times the rate of White adults (which already represents a decrease from more than 8 times the rate in 2000). For more on the many ways in which Black Americans and other Americans of color are systemically overpoliced and overpunished for the same crimes as White Americans, see, e.g. United States Sentencing Commission. (2023). *Demographic differences in federal sentencing*. Retrieved March 1, 2026 from <https://www.ussc.gov/research/research-reports/2023-demographic-differences-federal-sentencing>; Sabol, W.J., Wallace, A., & Johnson, T.L. (2022). *Justice system disparities: Black-white national imprisonment trends, 2000 to 2020*. Council on Criminal Justice. <https://reports.counciloncj.org/racial-disparities/national-trends>; ACLU. (2020) *A tale of two countries: Racially targeted arrests in the era of marijuana reform*. <https://www.aclu.org/publications/tale-two-countries-racially-targeted-arrests-era-marijuana-reform>

technology use, and to track their actions in ways that threaten to further increase disparities.³⁵⁴ There are also cases where technology has further expanded opportunities to punish students, such as the 9-year-old Black student in Louisiana who was suspended for six days after his teacher reported a BB gun visible in his bedroom during virtual learning (the initial school recommendation was expulsion).³⁵⁵ Disciplinary disparities are already a major educational issue in the nation and especially the South, where Black students and other students of color are disciplined more frequently and more harshly for the same behaviors as their White peers, despite the fact that research consistently shows that these overpunishments are *not* a result of more, or more egregious, misbehavior.³⁵⁶ Avoiding uncritical utilization of technology that reflects, reinforces, or even expands these disparities must be a primary consideration moving forward to avoid growing concerns in this area.

AI and the EdTech Landscape

EdTech has developed rapidly in recent decades. High-stakes accountability policies introduced by No Child Left Behind (2001) resulted in an expanded but largely unregulated “market for school improvement.”³⁵⁷

While many technology products are of high quality, EdTech providers may lack empirical evidence of the causal impact of their products.³⁵⁸ In the absence of accountability for outcomes, low-quality providers are able to remain in the market.³⁵⁹ Even when evidence does exist, EdTech may be misaligned with the grade level or types of students using the product or may not appropriately serve the purpose for which it is being used. Absent relevant evidence, practitioners may rely on word-of-mouth and marketing from EdTech providers when selecting among options.³⁶⁰ This can be particularly true in the case of what right now is likely the most attended-to aspect of EdTech: artificial intelligence (AI).

Today, there is a substantial amount of attention being given to the uses, challenges, and dangers of AI and the integration of AI into many aspects of technology and our daily lives. What is understood about AI is rapidly developing as the AI environment changes every day. AI is a truly revolutionary technology that represents a new high-stakes educational frontier, but it brings a revolutionary challenge as well. IBM notes, “As AI becomes more advanced ... not even the engineers or data scientists who create the algorithm can understand or explain what exactly is happening inside them or

354 E.g., Muñoz, J. O. (2021). Exclusionary discipline policies, school-police partnerships, surveillance technologies and disproportionality: A review of the school to prison pipeline literature. *The Urban Review*, 53(5), 735-760.

355 Crespo, G. (2020, October 4). *4th grader suspended for having a BB gun in his bedroom during virtual learning*. CNN. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/09/26/us/student-suspended-gun-virtual/index.html>; ACLU of Louisiana (2020, September 28). *ACLU of Louisiana condemns suspension of 4th grader Ka'Mauri Harrison for BB gun*. [Press Release]. <https://www.laaclu.org/en/press-releases/aclu-louisiana-condemns-suspension-4th-grader-kamauri-harrison-bb-gun>

356 Altman, M. (2024) *Miles to go: The state of education for Black students in America*. Southern Education Foundation. <https://southerneducation.org/what-we-do/milestogo2024/>

357 Burch, P. (2006). The new educational privatization: Educational contracting and the restructuring of public education. *Teachers College Record*, 108(12), 2582–2610. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9620.2006.00797.x>; Lu, A., Gilbert, E., Jocelyn, B., Waymack, N., & Loeb, S. (2025). *What's in a contract? How outcomes-based contracting reshapes school district-vendor relationships*. SCALE Initiative Accelerate for Learning at Stanford University. <https://scale.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/How%20Outcomes-Based%20Contracting%20Reshapes%20School%20District%20Vendor%20Relationships.pdf>

358 Forbes S. & Gordon N. (2012). *When educators are the learners: Private contracting by public schools*. *The B.E. Journal of Economic Analysis & Policy*, De Gruyter, 12(1), 1-29. <https://doi.org/10.1515/1935-1682.3093>

359 Burch, P. (2006). The new educational privatization: Educational contracting and the restructuring of public education. *Teachers College Record*, 108(12), 2582–2610. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9620.2006.00797.x>

360 Lu, A., Gilbert, E., Jocelyn, B., Waymack, N., & Loeb, S.. (2025). *What's in a contract? How outcomes-based contracting reshapes school district-vendor relationships*. SCALE Initiative Accelerate for Learning at Stanford University. <https://scale.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/How%20Outcomes-Based%20Contracting%20Reshapes%20School%20District%20Vendor%20Relationships.pdf>; Again, much of this is linked to funding disparities that mean that some better-resourced schools may have the ability and capacity to implement thoughtful EdTech tools and programs with fidelity for their students while other schools do not have that same capacity or those same opportunities.



how the AI algorithm arrived at a specific result.”³⁶¹ Given the concerns already noted regarding the dangers of bias in “neutral” algorithms, as well as recent and well-publicized events in which AI has produced clearly concerning results in creating hate speech, encouraging self harm, and other serious problems,³⁶² it is clear that questions remain around the safe and effective use of AI. UNESCO highlights “the potential AI systems have to embed biases, contribute to climate degradation, threaten human rights and more.”³⁶³

AI brings huge advantages that cannot be ignored, and this increases the importance of ensuring that students know how to use these tools effectively; the power of AI suggests dramatic differences in opportunity between those who are AI literate and those who are not. SEF released a report of its Southern Early Childhood Education Justice (SECEJ) Network in summer 2024 that uses the AI process of machine learning to increase the power of its data analysis of inequities in Head

Start funding and allocation to identify strategies for strengthening the program and improving access.³⁶⁴ The responsible use of AI in this report strengthened its analysis and expanded what was possible for it to do. Many people use AI every day to examine complex problems, identify new directions, and help them think in new and different ways.

However, not all AI use is responsible, reliable, or safe, and current research raises ethical and practical questions about AI, including its potential to replace or interfere with both teaching and learning, the bias in its algorithms that “may be inescapable,”³⁶⁵ privacy and data concerns, and its broader impact.³⁶⁶ Further, not all schools and districts have staff who can identify quality AI and EdTech tools, just as many lacked the ability to do so with the technology available in the early days of No Child Left Behind, but on a far more massive scale given the enormous power of AI. AI has great capacity to create beneficial outcomes for many students,³⁶⁷ as a learning tool, and even in enabling us to rethink what learning and schooling mean and are.³⁶⁸ Attention to issues of equity and fairness in its implementation, however, is paramount.

Again, the effectiveness of AI and EdTech interventions hinges on using the programs as they are intended to be used.³⁶⁹ This also often requires students to spend sufficient time with the technology. However, some research indicates that achieving the recommended time commitment is rare. One study found that for

361 IBM. (n.d.) *What is explainable AI?* <https://www.ibm.com/think/topics/explainable-ai>

362 E.g., Yang, M. (2025, July 12). *Elon Musk's AI firm apologizes after chatbot Grok praises Hitler*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/jul/12/elon-musk-grok-antisemitic>; Jamali, L. (2026, March 4). *Father claims Google's AI product fueled son's delusional spiral*. BBC. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/czx44p99457o>

363 UNESCO. (n.d.) *Ethics of Artificial Intelligence*. <https://www.unesco.org/en/artificial-intelligence/recommendation-ethics>

364 Grace, C., Thornburg, K., Keith, S.N., Altman, M., & Boyle, A. (2024). *Strengthening support for our youngest children: Steps for improving Head Start*. Southern Education Foundation. <https://southerneducation.org/publications/head-start-report/>

365 Peterkin-Rawls, J. F. (2024). *AI as a tool for education equity: A review of recent literature*. *JRGE*, 13, 190-204. <https://digitalcommons.tourolaw.edu/jrge/vol13/iss1/10>

366 Ibid.

367 Ibid.

368 Mote, E. (2025, October 24). *The future of education: Rethinking what we know*. Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/councils/forbesnonprofitcouncil/2025/10/24/the-future-of-education-rethinking-what-we-know/>

369 Holt, L. (2024). *The 5 percent problem*. *Education Next*, 24(4). <https://www.educationnext.org/5-percent-problem-online-mathematics-programs-may-benefit-most-kids-who-need-it-least/>

EdTech products recommending 30 to 90 minutes of usage per week, only between 5 and 12 percent of students met these recommendations.³⁷⁰ Notably, the students who do see results from EdTech products tend to be higher-income and higher-performing.³⁷¹

Looking Ahead: Using Technology in Service of Effective Learning

The unprecedented power and information processing possible with AI and modern EdTech present incredible opportunities for students and schools to expand learning, think in new ways, and connect people and ideas in service of innovation and shared knowledge building. However, this immense potential for learning and growth also threatens to become a source of even larger disparities if current national and regional trends continue and some students — often those who already have substantially greater access to educational resources and opportunity — have the ability to access high-quality technological tools aligned with effective learning while others do not. In recent years, SEF has collaborated at the forefront of EdTech and innovation to expand technology access and opportunity for more students in effective and educationally sound ways, but the impact and reach of EdTech continue to develop and raise new questions and challenges every day. In many ways, this issue reflects trends and concerns similar to other topics discussed in this report, but the sheer power and potential of modern technology gives EdTech a unique and supremely important place in the educational ecosystem.

To prepare the next generation workforce with the capacity to use modern tools effectively, which is

essential to our continued national well-being, it is absolutely vital to ensure that we address disparities in technology access and use now rather than allowing them to become a new front in sustaining or expanding inequity. The way the tools “learn” from current data that already reflects major biases and disparities raises further concerns that, without critical attention to the most fair and accurate processes for training our technology in ways that limit and mitigate this issue, we run the risk of instead further institutionalizing and systematizing these biases in ways that unfairly affect students.

The impact of AI and our new technological paradigm has been compared by some scholars to events as impactful as the industrial revolution or the arrival of European colonialist settlers in the Americas³⁷² in attempting to frame its importance and its revolutionary effects on our thinking and our world. This new paradigm can and should usher in an educational era of more purposeful, effective, evidence-aligned, and student-centered work that leverages what is best and most beneficial about modern EdTech. It is essential that we attend with great care to making sure this technology is used to bring about the positive outcomes whose need is highlighted in this report, and that we work with full energy to ensure that future EdTech developments close opportunity gaps and improve our capacity to create the next generation of leaders and innovators, rather than increasing disparities and irreparably limiting which students have the skills and knowledge needed to interact fully and capably with our modern world.

370 Center for Education Policy Research. (2016). *DreamBox Learning Achievement Growth in the Howard County Public School System and Rocketship Education*. <https://cepr.harvard.edu/sites/g/files/omnuum9881/files/cepr/files/dreambox-key-findings.pdf>; Marple, S., Jaquet, K., Laudone, A., Sewell, J., & Liepmann, K. (2019). *i-Ready in 7th grade math classes: A mixed methods case study*. WestEd. https://f14f78b2-f764-4a7b-8742-57cf62de1b57.filesusr.com/ugd/2c805c_32541c8af0a743ceb4ed37a5696fe7b8.pdf; Weatherholtz, K., Grimaldi, P. J., & Hill, K. M. (2022). *Use of MAP Accelerator associated with better-than-projected gains in MAP Growth scores*. Khan Academy. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1qFr_4ILY6VEAH8ai5A8DV6P0fH2rmpHz/view

371 Holt, L. (2024). *The 5 percent problem*. *Education Next*, 24(4). <https://www.educationnext.org/5-percent-problem-online-mathematics-programs-may-benefit-most-kids-who-need-it-least/>

372 E.g., Abis, S., & Veldkamp, L. (2024). The changing economics of knowledge production. *The Review of Financial Studies*, 37(1), 89-118.; Lambrechts, W., Sinha, S., & Mosoetsa, S. (2022). Colonization by algorithms in the fourth industrial revolution. *IEEE Access*, 10, 11057-11064.

CONCLUSION

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, our nation faces a serious challenge. Current data show that disparities in access and opportunity across early childhood, K-12, and postsecondary education are needlessly limiting the pool of candidates for the jobs and industries we all very much need to benefit from in our future world. Many current projections suggest that we are not on track to create the next generation of essential professionals with the skills, abilities, and technical and technological knowledge they will need.

While this report covers a broad range of topics, the data and projections here share many key similarities. Our systems of education do not exist in a vacuum. Rather, students' opportunities and outcomes are deeply linked to social determinants inside and outside of education that affect where they attend school, what resources they have access to, and how these systems open up — or do not open up — the possibilities they are intended to provide students.

In many cases, we already know from current data what needs to be done and even how to do it, but the fact remains that for the majority of students in the majority of schools, these things simply are not happening.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused catastrophic harms to this country and its people, but it also presents a reset opportunity to take stock and to move purposefully into the future we want to build. Its effects could not and cannot simply be ignored. Changes in our lives and in our society during and after the pandemic were and are not optional; they are already happening and will continue to happen. As we move into the future, we should choose to change in ways that increase access rather than limiting it, that expand opportunity rather than hoarding it, and that simply give all students the best chance to succeed in ways that benefit themselves and all of us. ***Why would we wish for anything else?***





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Southern Education Foundation, founded in 1867, is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization supported by partners and donors committed to advancing equitable education policies and practices that elevate learning for Black students, other students of color, and students from low-income families in the Southern states. We develop and disseminate research-based solutions for policy-makers and grow the capacity of education leaders and influencers to create systemic change.