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The New Normal in K-12 Education

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From rapid tech rollouts to digital divides, inclusive storytelling to culture wars and book bans, and virtual learning to the science of reading, the education news cycle over the last decade has taken families on a high-speed rollercoaster ride of chaos and change. Headlines today cover the stalls in reading and math recovery, but parents and educators worry about what students are carrying with them to school every day: complex mental health challenges, questions about how new technologies will impact their futures, and concerns about whether they're safe at school. Our new report, [The New Normal](#), tackles those debates, describing the complex landscape and the urgency for Democrats to come to the table and lead in addressing the needs of students and schools.

What *Is* the New Normal?

The more things change, the more they stay the same. And today's new normal does indeed involve issues new and old:

1. **School Choice:** Charter school expansion dominated early school choice debates, but many new models have since proliferated. Democrats must respond to increasing calls from parents for more options in where and how their children learn, even while rejecting private school vouchers. They can instead focus on public school choice, which offers the flexibility that parents seek by providing the opportunity to stay within their district, but attend a school that better meets their child's needs.
2. **Accountability and Student Data:** Standardized tests are now the norm for measuring student progress and school success. However, some experts point to changes in accountability measures and the corresponding elimination of high-stakes consequences as sources for the academic progress plateau. Democrats can no longer sit on their hands. Their agenda must answer fundamental questions about how to boost student achievement and whether stricter accountability measures are needed to do so.
3. **Family Engagement:** Pandemic-era virtual learning allowed families to see firsthand how their children learn and, in some cases, sparked cultural debates that drove new parent voices into schools. As schools rethink family engagement activities in the reshaped environment, Democrats have a timely opportunity to ensure that parents are a valued voice in the modern K-12 education agenda.
4. **School Safety:** Concern for school safety has risen to the top of polls as a primary concern for families, representing one of the most significant changes over the last decade. School safety goes beyond strengthened infrastructure and procedures, as a supportive school culture that tends to mental health plays a major role in ensuring students feel safe. A new Democratic platform must address school violence with

robust student supports that promote school safety and mental and emotional well-being.

5. **Teacher Support and Development:** Voters have become acutely aware that the challenges of the teaching profession go beyond low pay. Teacher training, professional development, and day-to-day supports must be innovated to meet the demands of today's classrooms. Alongside student-oriented proposals for a modernized education system, Democrats must include a corresponding revamp for teachers.
6. **College vs. Career Preparation:** In the early 2000s, bachelor's degrees became the standard for entry-level jobs. Today, shifts in the economy and job market have heightened expectations for K-12 schools to prepare students for success after high school, whether that means college, career, or both. As national discourse surrounding student readiness intensifies, Democrats must clearly articulate how schools can prepare students for whichever pathways they choose.
7. **Artificial Intelligence:** AI has been implemented rapidly, often without clear guidance on using the technology. Disagreement and fear own today's debates over AI, and it is imperative that bipartisan action is taken to protect children from harm. Democrats should fill the regulatory void with a coherent strategy to safeguard students using AI in school settings.

Where Do Democrats Go From Here?

It's no question that the changes in American society over the last decade impacted K-12 education. Republicans have reshaped the K-12 education landscape by advancing state policies they claim respond to the challenges facing families and schools, but ultimately remain rooted in the right's longstanding goal of a privatized K-12 education system. The Trump Administration has focused its efforts on dismantling the Department of Education, a separate decades-old aim of the GOP. In response, questions are turning to echoes: where are the Democrats, and what do they stand for? Voters and families will not wait idly by—they are voting based on the needs of their children, and they must be met with clear commitments and direction from leaders who have listened to their needs. Democrats must confront the moment and offer ambitious plans and goals that show families they're listening, and they're taking the crisis seriously. Education's new normal is complex and dynamic, and the leadup to the 2028 election will be a defining opportunity for Democrats to reclaim leadership on education and articulate an affirmative agenda that delivers clear solutions and a coherent path forward.

