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The New Normal in K-12 Education (2026 Edition)

Ellie Cash



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 an unending rollercoaster ride of chaos and change. Headlines today cover the stalls in reading and math recovery, while emerging analyses show that academic outcomes plateaued and began to decline years *before* the pandemic.¹ But parents and educators still see signs of the pandemic's impact on students' academic progress and worry about what students bring with them to school today: complex mental health challenges, questions about how new technologies will impact their future, and concerns about whether they're safe at school.

Third Way published a report called The New Normal in 2016, making the case that while K-12 education policies had radically shifted across the country, debates among policymakers at the time still cycled through old fights. Ten years ago, stagnation in policy and progress was fueled by rhetoric around the expansion of charter schools and the growth of alternative teacher training programs like Teach for America. Many of 2016's debates—like how to drive meaningful school accountability—persist today, while new challenges related to AI and pathways after high school have added layers to the conversation. Parents and educators have been left to balance these competing priorities, while policymakers have slow-walked their responses.

A record low 35% of Americans are satisfied with the quality of K-12 education, and parents are loud and clear: they're "voting for their kids' education, not political parties."² Republicans have reshaped the 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?

The New Normal (2026 Version) tackles today's debates, describing the complex landscape for issues new and old, while adding urgency to the echoes. Educators, families, and children need creative, innovative solutions now. Democrats must confront the moment and offer ambitious plans and goals that show families they're listening, and they're taking the crisis seriously. Click [here](#) to read the executive summary.

1. School Choice

The Old Fight

Should families be able to choose the school their students attend?

The New Normal

Charter school expansion dominated early school choice debates, but choice models took off in the last decade. Almost every state now has some form of public-school open enrollment, such as intra- and inter-district school transfers, charter schools, and magnet schools. Nearly 20 states have adopted universal school choice policies, carried out through vouchers, tax credit scholarships, or Education Savings Accounts (ESAs).

But not all school choice policies are created equal. Vouchers are most often used by families who were already paying full tuition and therefore strain state budgets while side-stepping accountability mechanisms that measure private schools' impact. On the other hand, public school choice programs are more accessible to families and require outcomes reporting.

The public's view of school choice is also evolving. PDK's annual poll found that 59% of parents would enroll their child in a non-public school if they were provided at least partial funding.³ The same poll found a small increase in support for public charter and lab schools, with 46% of voters in favor. But when voters were asked to prioritize education issues, the Hunt Institute found increasing school choice options—public or private—fell to the bottom of the list, though 68% of voters indicated it was an important issue.⁴ Partisan divides over school vouchers remain: 57% of Democrats oppose, while 61% of Republicans support. While polls are inconsistent on *how* to implement school choice, there is no denying that Democrats must respond to parents who increasingly express a desire for options in where and how their children learn.⁵

The New Debates: What kind of school choice is best for student outcomes?

- **What are the most effective ways to implement public school choice?** Proponents of public school choice offer a solution to the flexibility that parents seek: the opportunity to stay within their district and community, but attend a school that they determine better meets their child's needs. Universal participation is the key factor in effective public school choice programs, as districts with opt-in programs have proven much more difficult to navigate and therefore less accessible to students from historically underserved backgrounds.⁶ But only 9% of programs from the 150 largest school districts operate with that model, while the other 91% require families to opt in and submit applications. The distance between students and the school they choose matters, too. The closer a student is to their choice school, the higher their achievement, *and vice versa*: as a student's distance from a school grows, their achievement declines, up to one-third of a grade level of learning. Offering public

school choice won't be a one-step solution, but if designed effectively, it can contribute to a larger plan to improve public education.

- **Should public funds be used to pay for private and religious school tuition?** The studies are clear: students who use vouchers to attend private schools end up with worse academic outcomes and college enrollment rates than their public school peers.⁷ Accountability is critical, but advocates across the country have successfully won campaigns for flexible state choice programs that do not require private schools to issue the same assessments as public schools. Parents, policymakers, and researchers are left with little reliable data on student outcomes. As choice programs evolve and Democratic leaders weigh their participation, they must continue to reject invitations to embrace private school choice, and instead call attention to both the role these programs play in exacerbating gaps in student success and the absence of accountability.⁸
- **Should governors use the new federal tax credit to provide resources to public school students?** The new tax credit hinges on conflicting approaches: the original intent was to fund school vouchers, but it can also be used to support public school students through resources such as assistive technology, tutoring, and afterschool programs. Most Democratic governors have pushed off deciding whether to participate as the final regulations take shape, while almost every Republican governor has opted into the program. Although voucher proponents make opting in a difficult decision, Democratic governors can take the opportunity to explore how these flexible federal education dollars could bolster services for public school students, especially at a time when states face budget cuts.⁹ For example, state leaders can establish voluntary standards that recognize scholarship organizations focused on public schools, or incentivize engagement from statewide and local organizations that are already connected with public schools and strongly positioned to offer services.¹⁰ Democrats are reasonably hesitant about the intent of the tax credit, but with the right strategy, this new pot of funding could serve as an opportunity to support the highest-need students.
- **How will we ensure educational opportunities in areas where school choice options are limited?** Rural students make up about 20% of America's public-school enrollment.¹¹ Their families do not have a better-performing school across town or a network of charter schools to choose from, a reminder that choice is simply not an option for one in five students. Despite the efforts of well-funded and well-organized conservative advocacy groups, rural Republicans reject voucher proposals with a clear-eyed understanding that vouchers primarily benefit families who were already paying for their child to attend private school.¹² As states—red and blue—make plans to expand school choice, legislators must protect funding and resources for rural public schools. By nature of serving a smaller community, rural schools have a smaller

local revenue base and rely more heavily on state support. State policymakers must protect allocated funds for rural communities to ensure foundational needs like teacher training and safeguard students' access to essential technology.

2. Accountability and Student Data

The Old Fight

Are standardized tests the best way to measure learning?

The New Normal

Analyses on student achievement today *rely* on the norm that standardized tests are essential to tracking student progress and evaluating school success. States and districts are tasked with reviewing student assessment data against their accountability systems to drive school improvement efforts. However, experts increasingly point to changes in accountability measures and the corresponding elimination of high-stakes consequences as sources for the academic progress plateau.¹³ Following the lofty goals and contentious annual testing mandates of *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) responded to arguments that educators were forced to “teach to the test” by allowing states more authority to develop their own assessments and accountability plans. Nearly ten years after ESSA passed, an EdTrust analysis of state accountability systems elevated an alarming concern: states administered the required tests, but agencies failed to connect low-achieving schools with the resources that would enable student progress.¹⁴ Only 42% of districts' school improvement plans included all of ESSA's requirements; only half identified resource inequities that schools faced.¹⁵

The Trump Administration has introduced another layer of concern, encouraging states to pursue waivers that grant broader flexibility of ESSA requirements—including testing. Advocates warn that these waivers could further water down school accountability, referencing Alabama's waiver request that could lower the bar for students' mastery of skills needed after high school.¹⁶

ESSA's flexibility was intended to enable states and districts to set ambitious goals tailored to the needs of their communities, not to meet compliance-oriented checklists. Now that standardized tests are understood as imperative measures of student progress, states must raise the bar and intentionally choose testing measures (even through thoughtful waivers) to assess student outcomes while holding schools accountable for ensuring students meet their potential. And facing clashes on how to address this urgent problem, Democrats can no longer sit on their hands. Their agenda must answer fundamental questions about how

we will boost student achievement and whether stricter accountability measures are needed to do so.

The New Debates: How can teachers, districts, and states better use testing data to improve and customize student support and outcomes?

- **How can we ensure educators have the training and time they need to analyze test data and adjust their instruction to meet students' needs?**

Teachers face three barriers to using assessment data to improve their practice and student outcomes: access to student data, an understanding of how to analyze it, and time to do so. It's no secret that the vast majority of state education agencies are slow to release scores to districts and schools, which in turn restricts teachers' opportunities to make meaningful changes.¹⁷ Teachers need to get their hands on the data as soon as possible so they have ample time to analyze the results and design improved lessons. Educator surveys reveal another important missing piece. While analyzing student data is reported as one of the most common uses of professional development time, teachers simultaneously share that they do not have access to subject matter experts or coaches.¹⁸ Instructional coaches can guide educators beyond aggregate scores and into item-level analyses that pinpoint the specific lessons that need strengthening.¹⁹ Finally, to make the time and space to do so, districts and schools must get creative and develop schedules with collaborative planning time for teachers to dive into data and receive coaching.²⁰

- **How can states and districts better use assessment data to drive improvement in student outcomes?** While experts continue to uncover the effectiveness and fairness of standardized tests, federal and state data offer a window into how states are assessing students and whether results are probed closely enough to spur school improvement.²¹ A FutureEd analysis of 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores shows a glaring gap: data from three-quarters of states showed a minimum 15-point higher proficiency rate on their state exams than the NAEP in reading and math.²² For example, Virginia reported that 72% of eighth graders were proficient on their state reading assessment, but only 29% of eighth graders scored proficient on the NAEP.²³ These results lend credibility to concerns raised in recent years about states lowering assessment standards to inflate achievement rates, rather than leveraging data to provide targeted support to schools and improve student outcomes. An encouraging trend has emerged, fortunately, as some states have analyzed their assessment results and school-level data to identify strategies that reversed declining reading scores. Evidence-based methods such as high-dosage tutoring and high-quality instructional materials, as well as access to

data coaches, improved results in Alabama, Louisiana, Massachusetts, and Mississippi. ²⁴ Student success in these states proves that shifting from testing compliance to direct district support can drive learning gains.

- **How can we use technology to create better, timelier assessments that, in turn, create clear, actionable data for teachers?** Over the last decade, teachers have embraced digital tools like Kahoot! and Quizizz for real-time formative learning checks alongside “gamified” experiences that are popular among students. Emerging technologies present the potential for states and districts to address gaps in assessment quality, as well as the time it takes to redesign them. Multiple studies have found that AI was successful in aligning classroom assessments with state standards, and the same can be done at the state level to compare state exams with the NAEP. ²⁵ Though the absence of AI guidance has contributed to skepticism about its use in grading state tests, states like Texas have already piloted the practice and returned test scores to families in record time. ²⁶ These practices are not perfect, but Democrats have a clear opening to lead on policies that use technology safely to increase capacity and deliver actionable results for educators.

3. Family Engagement

The Old Fight

How involved should families be in their child’s school experience?

The New Normal

Long gone are the days when “Back to School Night” and graduation were the primary opportunities for families to step foot in their child’s school. 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. Add in the technology woven into families’ and students’ daily lives, and a new standard of parental involvement has emerged.

Research has long shown that family engagement in a child’s learning improves their academic outcomes. ²⁷ That involvement was reshaped when societal shifts merged with the learning experience. Moms for Liberty and Parents Defending Education launched a conservative push for “parental rights,” focusing their efforts on banning books with diverse themes and electing aligned officials to school boards. ²⁸ Conversely, the National Parents Union (NPU) sounded the alarm on “the bread-and-butter stuff”: severe mental health challenges and the need for more transparency about support for high-need students, especially students of color and low-income students. ²⁹ Family surveys

repeatedly rank academic outcomes and school safety as the most important issues, while culture-war topics rank much lower.³⁰ 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.

The New Debates: How can schools build trusting partnerships with families to ensure they feel engaged and contribute to improved student outcomes?

- **How can we make family engagement accessible for all families?** Traditional family engagement opportunities often happen during after-school hours and in the evenings, when many parents and caregivers work second jobs or have conflicting commitments. Offering a wider range of options can allow every family to have a touchpoint, as can varying the scope of activities available. Some parents may want and be able to volunteer as a classroom assistant or field trip leader. Others will need virtual meetings or more flexible times that stick to focused discussions on their child's academic progress. Schools can also offer hands-on academic activities to keep parents in the loop and conduct a shared lesson, demonstrating strategies that family members can practice at home. These strategies will only be effective if families are aware of them; schools must ensure that contact information is up to date and post events across social media and school websites.
- **How can technology support family engagement, while not overwhelming parents or asking too much of teachers?** One silver lining of the pandemic was the adaptation of digital tools to communicate with families. Parents are now accustomed to receiving district-wide messages, class reminders, and updates on daily assignments via apps or text messages. However, the convenience of these apps can dilute the barrier between teachers' professional responsibilities and round-the-clock availability, so clear policies about teachers' work hours and turnaround time are critical. Parents may also become overwhelmed by the ever-changing landscape of apps. Schools have been successful when they have included families in the decision-making process and determined which technology is most accessible for them.³¹ While technology can unlock essential communication between families and teachers, schools must intentionally select the digital platforms that fit their communities and convey how to use them effectively.
- **Should parents be involved in choosing classroom materials?** Despite the headlines, polls show that families continue to trust teachers and schools to choose curricular materials, although changes in teaching practices and declines in academic outcomes have led to more parental interest in classroom content and instruction.³² So

transparency is key—schools can balance this dynamic by communicating how materials meet learning objectives and showcasing teachers’ subject matter expertise to build trust in their instruction. This is especially true when implementing digital tools, as families want to make personalized decisions about screen time and specific apps. The emergence of AI offers a unique leverage point to invite families to learn about how students can safely and productively use new technology as a tool to support their learning. Transparency is particularly important as the rate of learning disability diagnoses grows across the country. Teachers working with students with disabilities can go beyond the mandated individualized education plan meeting and regularly share with parents how materials accommodate their child’s specific needs. By collaborating with families, schools can effectively respond to parents’ interests and help build confidence in classroom materials.

4. School Safety

The Old Fight

Do metal detectors make schools safer?

The New Normal

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. Following acts of violence, schools often secure their campuses through “hardening” measures—adding metal detectors, bag checks, security cameras, and strict entrance procedures. Though these protections earn bipartisan support, and the visible infrastructure reassures parents, their effectiveness in preventing violence is inconsistent.³³ More complex than structural barriers are students’ *feelings* of safety, rooted in dynamics that extend beyond what is visible to the adults in the room.

While debates over social and emotional learning (SEL) dominated school board meetings in 2022, parents in 2025 signaled their understanding of the importance of student belonging in creating a safe school environment.³⁴ Belonging—developed through SEL practices that engage students’ individual interests—has been shown to not only lower students’ anxiety but also increase their academic achievement. Mental health challenges soared during the pandemic, contributing to persistent chronic absenteeism when students returned to in-person learning. By exploring holistic instructional practices that both strengthen social bonds among peers and recognize students’ voices as individuals, schools can create an environment that promotes student belonging and safety. Student safety will no doubt persist as a core parent priority, so Democrats will need to be prepared to navigate

this challenging political dynamic with both strategic policies and clear messaging that ensure families feel their schools are safe.

The New Debates: How can schools help students feel safe and supported?

- **How can we foster a physically safe school environment?** At least half of school shootings were committed by current or former students, and industry leaders have taken on substantial work to develop preventative programs and threat assessment trainings.³⁵ Violence prevention research and analysis, including reports from the FBI and Secret Service, show that mental health supports and positive school climates aren't just nice-to-haves—they're essential.³⁶ Sandy Hook Promise, a national gun violence prevention nonprofit, describes how a safe school climate is fostered through trusted adults that students can turn to when they're concerned about a classmate.³⁷ Evidence now shows that these programs work: school shootings were prevented on campuses where staff and students were trained to understand serious mental health concerns and early warning signs of violent behavior.³⁸
- **What are the most effective ways to support students' mental health?** Isolation during the pandemic led to nationwide concern for youth mental health, but downward trends started much sooner. Cell phones and the rise of social media have built a highly pressurized environment for young people, and combined with challenges that may be happening at home, student behavior often reflects the chaos they feel. When students carry those pressures to school, leaders and educators are tasked with tending to their mental health while creating an environment that allows them to learn. Strengthening connectedness within schools through adult-to-student and student-to-student relationships is foundational to cultivating these environments.³⁹ When young people have a trusted teacher or classmate that they can turn to, they feel empowered to navigate academic challenges and outside stressors. And when they feel they can take on challenges, those foundational relationships support a school culture that prioritizes safety and mental health. It seems simple—school staff must *know* their students—but to allow for that to happen, school leaders must emphasize the importance of supportive relationship-building for students' mental health and sense of safety.
- **How do we create school environments where students feel like they belong?** To truly know students, schools and classrooms may need to think outside the box and create opportunities beyond the standard curriculum for students to share their interests and perspectives. Research shows that when learning is relevant to students' lives and experiences, students feel connected to their teachers, peers, and communities.⁴⁰ But this doesn't need to happen through a schoolwide event or

drastic changes to district-mandated curricula. Some teachers greet students by name each day, or school counselors schedule regular one-on-one check-ins. Others host classroom circle dialogues to allow students to build peer-to-peer trust. Today's headlines about declining academic outcomes are top of mind for every educator, but starting with the basics and getting to know their students is the first step to safe and successful learning.

5. Teacher Support and Development

The Old Fight

Should teacher performance be judged based on student test scores?

The New Normal

The teaching workforce has been significantly impacted by changes in expectations, including frequent shifts in curricular requirements, increased student mental health challenges, and overwhelming workloads. Along with new shifts, an old debate remains: Should teacher salaries increase based on student performance and classroom instruction evaluations? Even if the answer to that question is a resounding “yes,” performance pay is only one component of teacher success.

Voters have become acutely aware that the challenges of the teaching profession go beyond low pay—so much so that better support for teachers polls almost ten points higher than increasing teacher pay.⁴¹ As research consistently underscores the critical role of teacher retention in improving student outcomes, low job satisfaction rates reinforce the need to modernize test-based evaluation structures and professional development.⁴² Facing escalations in student behavior and persistent chronic absenteeism, educators report high levels of burnout and school understaffing. On top of that, 71% hold an additional job to support their income.⁴³ Alongside student-oriented proposals for a modernized education system, the teaching role needs to be modernized as well, and a robust Democratic agenda must include solutions for teachers.

The New Debates: How can we better support teacher development and retention?

- **How can we design professional development that feels helpful to teachers and implements evidence-based practices for improvement and retention?** Research highlights four key components of teacher professional development that lead to increased student test scores: instilling insight into specific content, motivating

change through positive reinforcement, developing techniques through peer modeling, and embedding context-specific practice.⁴⁴ Yet professional development often lacks these features, with only half of teachers expressing that the training they received was based on evidence of student content understanding or grew their subject matter expertise.⁴⁵ A student's teacher matters more than any other aspect of learning, so schools and districts must prioritize effective professional development programs.⁴⁶ High-performing states are acting on this: the Mississippi Marathon isn't just about incredible progress in third grade reading scores, but also about comprehensive teacher development.⁴⁷ The state reworked teacher training and invested in coaches who worked side-by-side with educators in the classroom to adjust their instruction in real time. Michigan is funding more literacy coaches, Maryland has expanded teacher training, and in Long Beach, California, curriculum specialists not only create the class materials but also co-teach lessons to model instructional strategies.⁴⁸ Intentionally designing teacher training around the needs of schools and communities can have profound impacts on students.

- **Can strategic staffing and instructional coaches help teachers both advance their careers and improve student achievement?** “Teaching is not a solo sport,” and because the new normal's challenges require new solutions, educators are increasingly open to innovative models.⁴⁹ Strategic staffing is one of these models—modifying the roles of teachers or other school professionals, adding paraprofessionals and teachers-in-training to classrooms, or shifting class sizes so newer teachers have smaller classes. These models often allow less experienced teachers to learn from veteran educators, and student achievement has increased as a result.⁵⁰ Lockhart Independent School District in Texas has created a leadership pathway, Lever Leaders, in which teachers serve as instructional coaches—adapting curriculum for school needs and leading professional development—while also co-teaching with other teachers across the school.⁵¹ School leaders know the unique needs of their schools, and district leaders can lean on their insights to explore new models for teachers' growth and advancement.
- **What policy levers can improve teacher training and provide the ongoing support needed to improve student success?** ESSA's description of teacher professional development is broad, requiring that development sessions be sustained, comprehensive, and collaborative. But states that have used policy to transform teacher training have seen significant improvements in student outcomes. Former Mississippi state leaders emphasize that policy changes spurred third grade reading gains, but it took years of ongoing engagement with state policymakers to make it happen.⁵² Legislation passed in 2009 allowed the state to take over failing schools, and leaders added an extra layer of accountability in 2013, requiring third graders who do not meet proficiency to be retained.⁵³ Though less high-profile, Texas passed

comprehensive legislation in 2025 to fund new pathways for teacher certification, and Illinois developed guidance requiring a prompt professional development plan for teachers who received poor evaluations.⁵⁴ Student progress across these states points to a clear opportunity for Democrats to craft policies to invest in teachers and, in turn, boost students' ability to reach their potential.

6. College vs. Career Preparation

The Old Fight

Is the primary goal of the K-12 education system to prepare students for college or the workforce?

The New Normal

In the early 2000s, bachelor's degrees became the standard for entry-level jobs, and K-12 schools around the country hung wall-to-wall strings of college pennants to motivate students to pursue postsecondary education. Millennial and Gen Z high schoolers committed to this standard, leading to gains in college enrollment and bachelor's degree completion. But as the cost of college rose, so did student debt, and the return on investment became a question for debate. Shifts in the economy and job market generated a renewed mission: schools must prepare students for college *and* career.

A college degree remains the surest pathway to economic mobility, but it cannot be the only route to a middle-class life. There's growing agreement that K-12 education (high schools in particular) should play a greater role in career exploration and ensuring students are prepared for the future they choose. As national discourse surrounding student preparedness intensifies, a new Democratic agenda must clearly articulate how elementary and secondary schools can prepare students for a variety of pathways after high school graduation.

The New Debates: How can we balance the core responsibility of school—developing academic foundations—with preparing students for pathways after high school?

- **What role should schools play in preparing students for the workforce?** Both parties agree that workforce preparation is an essential component of K-12 learning. Ninety-five percent of Democrats and 89% of Republicans rank “real-world skills for the future workforce” as a top priority, but 57% of those voters believe that schools are

getting worse at teaching those skills.⁵⁵ New pathways frameworks encourage career-connected exploration as early as elementary school, with initial exposure opening the door for students to pursue career-focused options like dual enrollment, work-based learning, and industry-recognized credentials in their high school years.⁵⁶ Many public K-12 systems have already made strides in developing curriculum and programming that offer students these options. For example, 39 states include both college and career readiness measures in their school accountability systems.⁵⁷ However, most of those systems are built on a patchwork of resources that vary in scope and quality, and states must make significant progress to facilitate cohesion for students' pathway options.

- **What credentials and skills will employers seek from the next generation of workers?** On the credentials side, over 70% of jobs require some postsecondary education, making college preparation a crucial ongoing responsibility of K-12 schools.⁵⁸ Although many graduating high schoolers continue to pursue college, growing interest in apprenticeships and workforce training points to the need for more coordinated career readiness strategies. Employers place a premium on durable, transferable skills like problem-solving, written and verbal communication, critical thinking, and teamwork, which are considered “the new career currency.”⁵⁹ As workforce demands evolve, schools will need to expose students to new career paths and their educational requirements, while helping build a foundation of skills that support success across industries.
- **How can we learn from states that are strengthening college and career preparation programs?** Education leaders can draw on proven models that have improved clarity for students about pathways after graduation. All4Ed's Future Ready Pathways encourages districts to “start with what [they] need the most” and work with community and workforce partners to strengthen existing systems.⁶⁰ Colorado Governor Jared Polis used his term as chair of the National Governors Association to launch an initiative urging states to closely examine student readiness and build the infrastructure needed to measure and report on outcomes.⁶¹ Rhode Island formed an interagency task force to convene its K-12 education, postsecondary, and workforce officials to build the Rhode Island Talent Dashboard, which connects K-12 data and postsecondary outcomes to support policymakers in making evidence-based decisions.⁶² Democrats can call on the key themes from these successful models to inform an agenda focused on setting tailored and ambitious goals, connecting practitioners, and using data for ongoing improvement.

7. Artificial Intelligence

The Old Fight

Does technology belong in the classroom?

The New Normal

The educational technology landscape has exploded in the last decade, from the push for a laptop for every student to the rapid deployment of virtual learning tools during the pandemic. And 2023 marked the unpredicted arrival of AI, which has been launched and implemented in a manner that can only be described as the good, the bad, and the devastating.

The good: AI has an ever-increasing potential to support students. In interviews with The New York Times, high schoolers recognized how AI has answered questions when a teacher wasn't available, suggested ways to improve their writing, or helped generate new ideas.⁶³ Advocates have shared powerful examples of how this technology can be tailored to meaningfully assist students with disabilities. AI tools can also replenish a key teacher resource: time. Teachers have shared that they've used AI for routine tasks like writing emails to parents and administrators, and to differentiate lessons and provide feedback on assignments.⁶⁴

The bad: When ChatGPT quickly gained mainstream popularity, AI immediately earned a reputation as a tool for cheating. Some students have seen the way their peers use the technology and are clear-eyed on how far it can be taken, describing it as "similar to a painkiller" that "can become addictive...remov[ing] the student's need to think."⁶⁵ One survey found 67% of students agreed that the more AI is used for schoolwork, the more it will harm critical thinking skills. The same survey showed that 62% of students reported using AI for homework in 2025.⁶⁶

Devastatingly, AI chatbots remain largely unregulated, leaving children exposed to risk, and in some cases, the worst possible situation has become a family's reality.⁶⁷ Disagreement and fear dominate today's debates over AI's best uses, but it is imperative that bipartisan action is taken to protect children from harm, and that Democrats fill the regulatory void with a coherent strategy to safeguard students using AI in school settings.

The New Debates: To what extent should AI be allowed in schools?

- **Is AI viewed as an essential skill for students to learn?** There is no question that technological proficiency is essential for modern life, but both education and the labor market remain mixed on the extent to which AI should and will be used in the workplace. Employer polling reveals a divided landscape, with some hiring practices favoring the use of AI tools, others seeking specific certifications, and many still

figuring out how to evaluate AI skills effectively.⁶⁸ But Gen Z already knows that AI skills will be necessary on the job and wants employers to provide AI-related training.⁶⁹ Similar to decades-old discussions around technology, employers and educators agree that AI literacy is one of many skills that make up a balanced and comprehensive education—but questions remain on when, how, and how much should take place in the classroom.

- **How can we teach students to use AI as a tool, rather than a replacement for learning?** A FutureEd study highlights Washington Leadership Academy, a DC charter school that embraced early experimentation with AI and carefully considered how much exposure students should have.⁷⁰ Teachers created tools tailored to instruction, including a chatbot that walks students through math problems using a voice modeled on their teacher. Notably, the school's leadership advocated for school-wide buy-in and created the space for teachers to experiment with AI as an advantageous resource rather than a forbidden shortcut. Most educators have not received that level of support—80% have not received any formal guidance—and some school districts have banned AI altogether.⁷¹ Yet nearly three years of experience have produced evidence-based recommendations for AI literacy. The EdSAFE AI Alliance proposes Learning Sciences Benchmarks that help leaders evaluate and choose tools that support learners' cognitive foundations and educators' pedagogical design while ensuring accountability measures capture authentic growth and understanding.⁷²
- **What regulations should be in place to protect student privacy and data while ensuring their safety, particularly when using AI chatbots?** AI has been rapidly deployed in classrooms and in the American workforce without clear agreement on appropriate uses or data privacy protocols. Advocates have worked intensively to define what regulations should include so that students can reap the benefits with protections operating in the background. The S.A.F.E. Benchmarks Framework describes a policy process and roadmap toward an AI ecosystem centered around safety, accountability, fairness and transparency, and efficacy.⁷³ This framework isn't just focused on the federal level; these recommendations are immediately actionable for K-12 districts and schools, as well as state policymakers. Democrats should join researchers and advocates and work across the aisle to advance AI literacy and safety for students.

Conclusion

It's no question that the changes in American society over the last decade impacted K-12 education. And though many educators pivoted, and some districts innovated with the moment, the broader ecosystem has not responded with the same urgency, leaving

students without the opportunities they deserve. Democrats have plenty of models from states, districts, and educators that show how to catalyze public education so students can realize their full potential. Voters and families will not wait idly by—they are voting based on their children's needs, and those needs must be met with clear commitments and direction from leaders who have listened to their needs. Education's new normal is complex and dynamic, and today's challenges call for a Democratic agenda that delivers clear solutions and a coherent path forward.

ENDNOTES



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